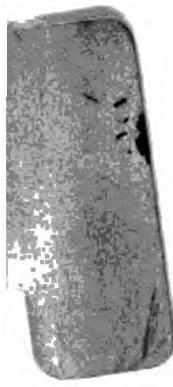


**ESCAPE**  
*from the*  
**BALKANS**

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MICHAEL PADEV

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Library  
of the  
University of Wisconsin



**Michael Padev** was born and educated in Sofia. After graduating from the American College there he began working as a reporter for Sofia newspapers. For several years he wrote for the papers and for Radio Sofia as a reporter, parliamentary correspondent, foreign editor and foreign correspondent, and in 1939 he was appointed Sofia correspondent of the *London Times*. He was later made News and Information Chief of the British press office and agency "Britannova." In 1940, when he was on the point of leaving for the United States for graduate work at the University of Illinois, he was arrested. After his escape into Turkey he made his way to Cairo, where he worked for some time in the British Middle East propaganda department. In October 1942, in Jerusalem, he married Princess Priscilla Bibesco, daughter of the former Rumanian minister to the United States. They arrived in London in January, and he is at present doing free-lance journalism and giving talks for BBC. Though he has written four Bulgarian books of nonfiction, *Escape from the Balkans* is Michael Padev's first full-length English book.



## **ESCAPE FROM THE BALKANS**



# **ESCAPE FROM THE BALKANS**

**BY**

**MICHAEL PADEV**

**THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY**  
**PUBLISHERS**  
**INDIANAPOLIS**   **NEW YORK**

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*Printed in the United States*

THE CORNWALL PRESS, CORNWALL, N. Y.

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## FOREWORD

IN THE summer of 1941, some weeks after Germany's attack on Russia, several hundred parachutists were dropped in the Balkans by Red Army planes to combat the occupying forces in all the Balkan countries and to assist in the organization of underground anti-Axis activities. Later in the year I myself saw some of these parachutists at work. I saw them fight and I saw them die. Their heroism inspired me to write their story and that story forms part of this book. But they had something more and rarer than courage: they were animated by a clear and steadfast ideal and for that ideal they fought and died. These parachutists were *not* Russians—they were Bulgarians, Croats, Greeks, Rumanians, Serbs and Slovenes. They fought—and some of them still fight—together, and their example has laid the foundations of Balkan underground unity on revolutionary bases. This underground unity, in my opinion, is the most significant political phenomenon of the war as far as the Balkans and Southeastern Europe are concerned. It is bound to have—as indeed present conditions (Spring 1943) in Yugoslavia show—great repercussions throughout the Balkans and will be one of the most important factors to be reckoned with when peace comes. Unfortunately this unity is hardly realized or taken into account in Britain and in the United States, in spite of the great interest that is in evidence in both countries toward the peace problems of Europe.

In this book I have presented these new and most important political phenomena in the Balkans mainly in the light of my own observations. I have tried to look on them with the eyes of a reporter, not with those of a politician, but it is useless to pretend that I am "impartial" or "neutral." I have endeavoured to be just, but not to be neutral, for I do not believe in neutrality. Neutrality is usually only a refuge for those who refuse to face the consequences of their own convictions.

No character in this book is fictitious and no event is imaginary, although some of the conversations are necessarily drawn from my imagination. It is a reporter's book and a book of personal experiences. In March 1941, when the German armies crossed the Danube from Rumania into Bulgaria, pending their attack on Greece and Yugoslavia, I found myself in jail in the Sofia Police Building. As the Gestapo representative who cross-examined me explained, I was considered too dangerous to be allowed to leave Bulgaria, which I had planned to do, and also too dangerous to be left at liberty. Since 1939 I had been the Sofia correspondent of the London *Times*, and the chief charges of the Gestapo against me were my "pernicious dispatches" and the "nefarious ideas" that as a journalist I had helped to propagate.

One year later I was at liberty and far from the Balkan terror. This book covers that year, certainly the most eventful and in many ways the most interesting of my life. I was in close touch with the Balkan underground world and my life brought me into contact with guerrilla bands, refugees from all over Europe, with Greek and Yugoslav officers escaped from internment, with outlaws of all kinds, with the women victims of the Nazi white-slave traffic, and above all with those Balkan federalists

who are fighting their desperate struggle for Balkan unity. It was something more than a life-and-death struggle. I was present at the birth of a new world and, as far as the Balkans are concerned, the foundation of a new conception of life.

Although my book deals to a certain extent with prisons, camps, Gestapo agents and hand-to-hand fights with the police, it is definitely not a "horror book" nor is it yet another "I've-just-escaped-from-a-Nazi-concentration-camp" story. I have described my personal experiences only insofar as they are related to those people who were fighting and are fighting the Balkan anti-Nazi fight. My conclusions represent my own point of view only and have no connection with any of the papers for which I have worked. Nor do they represent the point of view, official or unofficial, of any government, Balkan or non-Balkan, or that of any government department in any country.

For obvious reasons the names of many persons referred to in this book, and who, I hope, may still be alive, and the names of certain towns and villages and many details concerning my escape have been altered. I have tried to be faithful to the actual sequence of events, but my notes and files are still with the Gestapo and I have had only my memory on which to rely, so I hope I may be excused if I have overlooked or forgotten details pertaining to any of the political events described.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity of thanking those friends in the Balkans who made my escape and the writing of this book possible. I regret that it is impossible to mention their names. Particularly I would like to express my gratitude to my friends in Britain and the United States for their tolerance and helpful understand-

ing. I owe to the *Times* and to its support many of the advantages which my position as a journalist gave me and which enabled me to trespass into the political and diplomatic background of the events I describe. My thanks are also due to my agent, Laurence Pollinger, for his friendly suggestions and advice, and to Mary Bates, who typed my manuscript. To my wife I owe most of all for her constant help and encouragement.

M.P.

London, March 1943.

## **ESCAPE FROM THE BALKANS**



## CHAPTER I

### *Into Darkness*

"I APOLOGIZE for asking you to come so urgently, but the matter *is* urgent. . . ."

The voice of the Minister was slow and resolute. When he paused the silence of the room was punctuated only by the flames crackling in the fireplace, casting their network of shadow over his determined face, which bore traces of overwork and strain.

"A British national," he continued gravely, "and a member of the staff of this Legation has disappeared in the most mysterious circumstances. He was kidnaped while traveling from Sofia to Instanbul in the Orient Express. His suitcases remained in the carriage but there was no trace of him. . . ."

All of us were writing feverishly, determined to catch every word. Here was obviously a first-class, first-page story. Half an hour earlier we had been urgently requested to come to the Legation. The great rush with which we had been summoned was well justified. Here we were, listening to the Minister's account of the first open blow directed by the Gestapo against the British diplomatic mission to Bulgaria—six weeks before Hitler's blitz attack on Yugoslavia and only one day before his armies crossed the Danube from Rumania south into the very heart of the Balkans "to guarantee the peace and as-

sure the neutrality" of the peninsula. It was Thursday evening, February 27, 1941.

We were nearly a dozen people in all, the representatives in Sofia of the Anglo-American press. The Associated Press had its famous war correspondent, Bob St. John; Hugo Spaek was representing the United Press; Russell Hill, the New York *Herald Tribune*; David Walker, the London *Daily Mirror* and temporarily Reuter's as well; John Segrue,\* the *News Chronicle*; Frank Faul, the N.B.C.; George Weller, the Chicago *News*; Cedric Salter, the *Daily Mail*; and I—the London *Times* and temporarily the *Daily Express* as well. Most of the other foreign correspondents had already left for Belgrade and Istanbul, where they could cover the news without interference from the German Censor, whose office was to begin its work officially next day. Together with Steven Runciman, the Press Attaché, we were sitting grouped in a semicircle round the British Minister, Mr. George Rendel.

"Could you give us some details about the incident, sir?" St. John asked.

"Yes, now I can. The missing man, Mr. Greenevich, left Sofia last Monday on the Simplon-Orient Express for Istanbul. As an official of this Legation he had a diplomatic passport and diplomatic visas. After the Bulgarian frontier station of Svilengrad, which the train reached in the evening, he disappeared, and nobody has seen him since. The train entered Turkey without him. The Turkish authorities are quite definite about this. The other British nationals traveling on the same train wired to me directly they reached Istanbul, but so far all our inquiries have been in vain. The Bulgarian authorities profess com-

\* He was later captured by the Germans in Yugoslavia and has since died in captivity.

plete ignorance and have assured me that he was not asked to leave the train at their request. I am not satisfied with their explanation and I requested today to see the Prime Minister and informed him that we hold very strong views on the subject and demand immediate information as to the whereabouts of Mr. Greenevich."

"Could you give us some information about Mr. Greenevich himself?"

"He is of Russian origin, but he has been a British subject for the last twenty-five years. He has been an official of this Legation for over fifteen years."

"Did he carry any diplomatic bag or other documents with him?"

"No, nothing whatsoever. He was traveling with his personal luggage only."

"What exactly was his position in the Legation?"

"He was assistant to the Passport-Control Officer."

The conversation continued until we knew everything that the British Legation itself knew about this mysterious incident, which, unfortunately, was not very much. Then the Minister announced two other sensational events, both of which had also occurred during the last forty-eight hours. The premises of the British Consulate in Burgas, Bulgaria's chief Black Sea port, had been raided the night before, the door of the safe broken open and some documents stolen. The night before that, the Passport-Control Office of the Legation in Sofia, which was housed in the building next door to the Legation, was also raided. The door was forced, several of the desks broken open and documents stolen. . . .

"Well, well, well, it does look a bit unusual," exclaimed Hugo Spaek, after listening to these really gangsterlike

stories. "And what do the police authorities say about all this?"

"They give no explanation," the Minister went on. "All they have done is to increase the police escort of the Legation."

"Could you offer any explanation as to the purpose of these raids and thefts?"

"No, I cannot. I refrain from any comment. I can only give you the facts and express my deep disappointment that such things can happen in a country which still maintains diplomatic relations with us."

"Do you think they will be maintained much longer, Mr. Minister?"

This question was undoubtedly the most important one—it was St. John who put it.

"That depends entirely on the Bulgarian Government," was Mr. Rendel's simple answer. "If the Bulgarian Government decides to allow German troops to enter the country, I shall, of course, recommend to my Government the breaking off of relations."

"Does that mean that if German troops enter Bulgaria officially, Britain will break off diplomatic relations with the Bulgarian Government, and that the procedure that was adopted in Rumania will not be repeated?" Salter inquired.

"Yes, it does. I can assure you that it will not be repeated. I do not know the reasons for the British Legation remaining in Bucharest after the arrival of German troops there. I myself am not prepared to stay here in such a humiliating position, and I think I may tell you that my Government approves of my intention."

The interview was drawing to a close. Both the Minister

and Steven Runciman were obviously tired and worried, and we decided to leave early.

"Don't forget you're dining with me tonight," Steven reminded me, as I was leaving with Cedric Salter.

"I'll be at your flat in half an hour's time," I replied somewhat absent-mindedly.

I was depressed. The interview was undoubtedly a big story, but I felt that it was probably the last story I would send as a foreign correspondent from Sofia. This fact alone made me sad, for my work during the last few months had been really interesting. Now, the end was coming. . . .

Cedric interrupted my thoughts when we got outside the Legation.

"I advise you, Michael, to come with me tomorrow to Istanbul. It's getting rather hot here. Your papers and visas are in order, aren't they?"

"They are," I assured him.

"You'd be a fool to stay here any longer. Why, it's obvious they'll be here in no time now. And maybe then it will be too late."

I realized that Cedric was right.

"I'll leave Saturday morning," I replied. "One day after you."

"O.K. But I still think it would be better if you came with me tomorrow. I have a strange feeling!"

We reached a taxi rank, and Cedric repeated:

"Leave with me tomorrow—otherwise it will be too late!"

"I'll see you off at the station. Sunday we'll be having a drink together in Istanbul!"

"Fine! But I still advise you to leave with me. Telephone your message through tonight!"

"You have a complex about tomorrow, Cedric. Saturday will be O.K. too!"

"I don't know. Of course, you must decide for yourself. But I have a strange feeling."

He got into the taxi.

"Good-by, Cedric. See you tomorrow morning!"

"With your luggage, I hope!"

The taxi drove off.

Eight hours later I wished I had listened to Cedric and relied on his "strange feeling." He couldn't have made a better and truer prophecy!

Dining with Steven was a real rest after all that tiring day. Steven Runciman is one of the friendliest Englishmen I have ever met. He was appointed Press Attaché to the British Legation in Sofia in 1940. Not a professional diplomat but a historian, he is one of the most thorough students of Balkan and Bulgarian history in the English-speaking world. He speaks and writes Bulgarian to perfection, although he is too modest to admit it. A shy person altogether, his usual place at big official parties is in some corner of the room where, undisturbed by anyone, he can observe with interest either the pictures or the furniture of the house. He was even too modest to admit to his knowledge of Balkan affairs and Bulgarian history, and only those of his friends who knew him intimately were aware of how much he really knew. Yet, in dealing with people, and especially in dealing with journalists, Steven was successful, for we were all charmed by his sincerity and his simplicity. From our journalistic point of view, he ran the Press Office of the Legation with great skill and efficiency, and during the few months preceding the arrival of the Germans, it had become a big news agency.

One thing only could be regretted about Steven's appointment; it had come too late! Before the war, the British Legation in Sofia had no press attaché and no press or propaganda service whatsoever, whereas Goebbels had dispatched to Bulgaria over two hundred press and publicity experts, both official and unofficial, to pave the way for the benefits of the New Order. The situation in the other Balkan countries was much the same.

During the years that preceded the war, almost nothing was done to counteract the influence of German propaganda in the Balkans. It is true that French propaganda achieved no small measure of success, especially among her ex-allies, Yugoslavia and Rumania, and the collapse of France was a bitter shock and an unexpected disillusionment. France had raised the expectations of these countries without having the means to fulfil them, should they decide to join her in the struggle for European freedom. England had the will, if not in the first years of the war the means, to provide these countries with effective support. But she made no attempt to convince them of that, and that is one of the reasons why, after France's defeat, some of the Balkan leaders turned to listen to Goebbels' propaganda. I am not trying to camouflage the guilt of any of the Balkan quislings. I regret more than I condemn Britain's attitude. But, to so many people in Bulgaria, in Yugoslavia and in Rumania, Britain was a pink-colored island on a map. They could not know her, as she knew herself, nor foresee her heroic resistance, because she made no attempt to show herself to them in a true light.

Like the perfect host he was, Steven, during dinner, never spoke of the situation, and I enjoyed this short respite from

reality. That dinner was my last happy recollection of Sofia and of Bulgaria.

I returned home before eleven, for I still had a lot of work to do that evening. Several messages were lying on my desk. My informant from the Danube port, Russe, had put in an urgent call. I took the call at once and the information I received was bad. That night the Germans had begun crossing the Danube on pontoon bridges. They were all in uniform, and there was no attempt to hide anything. Obviously this meant that their official arrival would be announced in the morning. Several minutes later one of the local journalists, with whom I had been working regularly, telephoned to tell me that signposts in German were being erected at great speed on all the roads round Sofia. This meant that German troops were expected in Sofia either the next day, or Saturday. Then I received another most important piece of information: there were indications that a high Government official was preparing to leave very shortly by airplane. All this could only mean one thing: that the Bulgarian Government had already decided to sign the Tripartite Pact, and that the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister was about to leave for Germany for the usual ceremony, and to receive the first orders from his new master. Only one thing was still missing—the official communiqué.

I sat down at my desk and worked till two. I felt certain these were my last messages. I wrote several hundred words as first installments, for I intended sending fresh news and information in the morning. I put through calls to Geneva and Berne, but I was told that I would not be able to speak until seven in the morning as the line was engaged on official business. This looked suspicious, but I was too tired to think about it and went to bed.

"Get up!"

I opened my eyes and shut them again instinctively; a terrific flash of light blinded me. I was too dazed to understand what had happened. Was it a nightmare?

"Get up!"

A heavy hand tore the blankets from my bed. I opened my eyes again. The light was no longer on my face, but I still saw nothing.

"Don't try to resist. It's useless. Get up!"

I rose from the bed.

"Stop! Put your hands on your head."

"Who are you?" I finally asked.

"Hands up and put them on your head!"

I obeyed.

"Now you may get up!"

I stood on my legs and, still sleepy, threw a glance round the room. There were three men present. Two had revolvers in their hands. The third, who was nearest me, was holding the torch.

"Put the light on!" he commanded.

I switched on the lamp beside my bed, and glanced at the watch on the table. It was ten past four.

"Get dressed!" the man commanded again. "But, I repeat, no resistance. You see what those two fellows are holding, don't you? Now hurry!"

I looked at the two men with revolvers, who were standing motionless. One of them held his revolver in his left hand, and I remember thinking one of those inconsequential thoughts that overtake us in moments of danger: How strange—he's left-handed!

Then I began dressing, without a word. I tried not to hurry because I wanted time to think. What the hell was all this?

"Hurry! Hurry! Didn't I tell you we have no time to lose?"

I did not reply. Couldn't I try to make a dash for it? But one man stood by the door; the window was too far away and the other man's revolver was not more than two yards away from me.

Bad luck, I thought. So Cedric was right after all. What an idiot I was to have slept at home tonight! Why didn't I go somewhere else? And what shall I do now? Where are they going to take me? They can't shoot me here. No, they can't. But why have they come at four in the morning? They had no legal right to enter my house before sunrise. Are they arresting me? Or is it a secret arrest? Are they policemen, anyway? Good God, what a fool I am!

When I had put on my coat and shoes, I asked:

"What does all this mean? Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Police," the man replied laconically.

"Which police?"

"Don't be too curious."

"And why have you entered my house at night?"

"None of your business!"

"Where is your police identification card? Who ordered you to come?"

"Don't ask funny questions. Come on! I have to search the house!"

"Why? Where is your warrant?"

"I have oral instructions."

"From whom?"

"My chief."

"Who is he?"

"I have told you before—no funny questions! Or are you putting up resistance?"

"I am! By God, I am!" I shouted suddenly, and was amazed at myself.

"You will do what I tell you."

"Who are you?"

"All right. I am from the Political Police. I have orders from the Chief of Police."

"To search my house?"

"Yes."

"And what else?"

"You are under arrest."

"You can't arrest me without a written order. It is illegal."

"Don't be so stupid. I arrested a full colonel yesterday. In uniform too. We have special instructions and special powers now. You ought to know that."

"Tell me your name. Show me your identity card."

"Why?"

"I want to know who you are."

"O.K.!"

He showed me his police card and I made a note of his name.

"You are a fool!" he said, and laughed. "This name does not convey anything to you anyway. Come on, hurry up!"

"I want to telephone."

"To whom?"

"A Government official."

"Who?"

"The King's Secretary."

"O.K. Go ahead!"

I took up the telephone receiver and realized that the line had been cut.

The man laughed.

"Do you think we don't know our job? And for your information, let me tell you that there are men outside guarding the house as well!"

I sat down in despair on the bed. The two messages, typed and ready, were in front of me on my bed table near the telephone. My last messages! They would never get through.

"What is that?" the man asked, looking at the table.

"See for yourself," I replied.

He took my papers and glanced at them.

"That's just what I want," was his only comment.  
"Here, put them in the bag."

I turned and saw that he was addressing one of the two men; he was holding a bag in his hand (it was the left-handed man). He put the revolver in his pocket, opened the bag and dropped my papers inside without saying a word. Then he closed the bag, drew the revolver out of his pocket again and took up his previous position, near the door.

I realized how helpless I was. But how on earth had they entered the house? I had heard no noise whatsoever.

"Come on," the man said again. "Let's begin with your desk."

We went into the next room, where my desk and my books were.

"Go ahead!" I replied. I was resigned and sat motionless while he searched the desk. He found nothing except several copies of my dispatches. One of the drawers was full of letters, including some twelve-year-old love letters

dating back to my college days. As they were written in English, the man became tremendously interested.

"What are these?" he demanded.

"Letters, as you can see for yourself."

"Who wrote them?"

"I don't know."

"Why are they in English?"

"I don't know."

It was really amusing and I tried to tease him. He put them into the bag. I laughed out loud, and he was annoyed. That pleased me.

He then searched my bookshelves and, looking at the books, he appeared troubled.

"Do you know that I've got to go through all these damned books?"

I could not help laughing again, for there were now more than four hundred books in the room, and it would have taken him hours to go through them all.

"You'll sign a document certifying that I have gone through everything in the house," he said.

I saw no reason why he should have it all his own way. Obviously, he did not like the idea of searching all my books, as he was in a hurry. What did I care? I was in no hurry!

"I shall sign no document whatsoever," I replied calmly.

"Do you want me to confiscate all these books?" I was appalled by the idea. I loved my books and I had been collecting them for years. But I managed to keep calm and replied:

"As you choose!"

Finally the man glanced through about fifty books.

It was half past six in the morning when the search was

over. I signed a document stating that they had made it. They confiscated all the copies of my dispatches, several books, a couple of dozen letters (including the love letters) and an address book.

"Now let's go," the man said.

"Where?"

"You'll see soon enough!"

I put on my coat.

"Take two blankets with you," he commanded.

"Why should I?"

"Orders!"

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Orders," he replied. "Take two blankets, several shirts, socks and underwear."

I went into my room again, followed by the two men with the revolvers, and prepared the things he had told me to take. This meant concentration camp. I suddenly felt terribly frightened. Why shouldn't I try to escape?

"Hurry up!" the man shouted again. "You will have plenty of time to think!"

But I did not hurry. I managed to look through the window: it was already light outside. Two men were walking up and down and watching me.

"Come on; let's go!"

"All right!" I replied.

I followed the man out and the two men with the guns walked behind me. There was a car outside, and I got into it. The two men got in after me. They still uttered no word. I remained silent, too, and the car drove away.

"Get out!"

I really had not noticed where we were going. For a moment I thought I was dreaming, that it was all untrue. Then I decided nothing mattered anyway.

"Get out, I tell you!"

It was that man again. I got out of the car. Where was I? I had no time to see, for I was immediately rushed through the first door. A black corridor. The two men still behind me. I kept on wondering whether they would shoot. But I did not turn back. Was I too tired, too indifferent, too scared, too courageous? I still don't know.

A door opened and I entered a small room. The two men followed me. There was a small desk in the room with a uniformed policeman sitting at it.

"Empty your pockets," he ordered.

I obeyed.

"What about these handkerchiefs?" I asked.

"You may keep one only. Take off your belt. And your tie."

I obeyed,

"You can keep your money."

"Cell 12, third floor. Get out!"

I left the room. Another man appeared suddenly, from nowhere.

"Follow me!"

I followed him.

We entered a long, narrow corridor in which there were about half a dozen policemen with rifles.

"Cell 12."

"Here!"

I walked on several steps, and then an iron door was flung open.

"Get in!"

I saw only darkness from the door, but I entered obediently. I heard the door shut behind me and closed my eyes instinctively—it was too dark.

## CHAPTER II

### *Herr Drexler of the Gestapo*

"Good God, Michael!"

I opened my eyes but still I could hardly see.

"When were you arrested?"

Two arms shook me by the shoulders. I recognized the lean unshaven face and the sparkling green eyes that were peering into mine. It was George Valkov, a Sofia journalist, ex-editor of *Pladne*\*—the most democratic Sofia paper, suppressed in 1937—and a very old friend of mine.

"Pull yourself together and tell us the news!"

I sat down on the floor. George rubbed two wet handkerchiefs over my forehead and I felt somewhat relieved. Gradually I became accustomed to the darkness and realized that there were two other men in the cell, stretched out on the floor. It was a small cell, about ten feet long and five feet wide. There was a tiny window in one of the walls just below the low ceiling. It was covered with dark paper, obviously for blackout purposes. On the other side was the door, a big iron door with a small hole in it, like the lens of a camera. The only furniture consisted of two earthenware jars placed at opposite corners. I wondered what they were for.

"What's that?"

"At last you've decided to open your mouth," George replied. "I thought you'd gone dumb." It only then oc-

\* "Noon."

curred to me that these were the first words I had spoken.

"Those jars are for water," George continued.

The other men laughed.

"That is, one is for real water—so-called fresh water which you'll have to drink like the rest of us. The other . . ." He smiled. "Well, I'm a well-bred man and don't use vulgar words."

I understood him.

"Silence!"

The peephole in the door was flung open and a strange face appeared at it:

"Silence, I tell you!"

"Go to hell!" George shouted back.

The other two men started cursing.

"Pay no attention to that idiot," one of them explained. "He's one of the policemen on guard in the corridor. We're always as rude to them as we know how. They're brutes, but luckily they aren't allowed to enter our cells."

I was beginning to feel hungry.

"Is there anything to eat?" I asked.

George produced a grubby crust of bread from his pocket and threw it to me.

"Try it with water. You'll have to get used to it. It's all you're likely to get."

"You mean that's all they give you to eat?"

"I mean that's all they'll give you, too."

"But in prisons they . . ."

"In prisons it's different. I would far rather be in prison than here."

"So would I!" said one of the men.

"Have you been in prison?" I asked him.

"For eleven years," he replied simply.

George laughed.

"I am afraid you're in bad company."

"Is this the first time you've been arrested?" the other man asked. He seemed very surprised and slightly contemptuous.

"Yes," I admitted shyly.

"How old are you?"

"How old do you think?"

"Thirty?"

"He's younger," George interrupted. "He'll be flattered to think he looks thirty."

"And how old are you?" I inquired.

The prisoner smiled bitterly. "I bet you can't guess."

"Forty-five?"

"Not so bad. I'm thirty-one, but prison years count double."

As he spoke I saw that one of his legs sprawled on the floor, seemed motionless, as if paralyzed. His foot was wrapped in a wet shirt, obviously his only shirt, for his chest was bare.

"What's wrong?"

"Do you mean my leg?"

"Yes. What's the matter with it?"

George frowned at me and interrupted hurriedly. "Don't ask stupid questions! He came down from the Torture Room the other day. We may all go there today. So you'd better listen to me."

Horrified, I kept silent while George continued:

"You are now in hell. A scientific hell. There are two things you must remember. First, you've got to survive it. Remember that all the time—it helps. At the worst moments think only of that—you've got to survive it! Secondly, trust no one. Absolutely no one. That's all."

Now tell us the news. Did you read the papers this morning?"

Two days later, in the early hours of the morning, while we were still asleep, the iron door was flung open and a man was kicked in. He fell flat on his face on top of George, who cursed him wholeheartedly. But our new guest paid no attention. He selected another corner of the cell, rolled his overcoat into a bundle, sat down on it and with a friendly grin swept off his hat.

"Allow me to introduce myself, gentlemen; I am Tseko the Pickpocket."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," replied George coldly. "Or I would be if you'd shut up! We're trying to sleep."

"Sorry. I didn't know you slept so late in the mornings. Big shot, eh?"

"Keep your mouth shut, I tell you!" George growled with such ferocity that the man was silent. But not for long. Half an hour later when George decided that it was time to get up the newcomer ventured:

"You're political prisoners, aren't you?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, you see, I don't know you by sight. And I know everyone in the profession. What's more, I've been myself in every prison in the country. . . ."

"Do you know Steven Scarface?" George interrupted.

"You bet. Six years. Sofia Central Prison. I saw him there last winter."

"And Lame Todor?"

"Yep. He's Sofia Central, too. You seem to know us pretty well."

"When were you arrested?" George continued asking

questions, without paying much attention to Tseko's words.

"Days ago."

"How many?"

"Don't remember. And I don't care." The little man's face clouded over.

"Which cell were you in?"

"All over the building. Third floor, second floor, first floor. Damn it! Crowded like hell. All political. Not a soul I knew. Hundreds of new ones every day."

"Can you remember the names of the people you saw in the cells?" George inquired again.

"How can I? They weren't likely to tell me who they were. They thought I'd been sent to spy on them. Besides, the cells were absolutely jammed with people."

"Really?"

"We were fourteen last night in number 33. I nearly died of suffocation."

Gradually George succeeded in extracting some of the information he wanted about the other people in the building. The Pickpocket was given a cigarette in exchange. His spirits rose and he began to tell us his story. He was a thief. He wasn't ashamed; on the contrary, he was proud of his profession. According to him everyone stole, openly or secretly.

"I only steal small things," he explained, "for I always try to keep on the right side of the law." His idea of observing the law was never to steal anything costing more than five thousand *leva*.\* If you stole over five thousand leva's worth you might be sentenced for three years or more, which was bad. Under five thousand was safe enough: one year or less, which was all right. A mere

\* About fifty dollars.

holiday at the Government's expense. He wasn't a pick-pocket, in spite of his name. That damned nickname had stuck to him "like a postage stamp," because of his exploits years ago when he was young and inexperienced. He was registered as "Tseko the Pickpocket" even in the police files, which was annoying and insulting to his present standing. For he was now a "night raider." He smuggled himself into houses by night and stole whatever he could lay his hands on: clothes, shoes, cigarette boxes, silver forks, watches. . . . But always under five thousand leva! Yes, sir, he abided by his principles so strictly that once when he found seven thousand leva in a wallet he took only five and sacrificed the rest. The law is the law and he wasn't one to look for trouble. In general he couldn't complain. Life hadn't treated him badly. When they caught him he confessed and usually he got twelve months, which was nothing more than a rest. This time, however, he was annoyed with the police. For political reasons, he said.

"I never gave a damn who ruled this blasted country," Tseko concluded passionately. "And I still don't give a damn. But the law's the law, and when they catch me, they should hand me over to the Criminal Prosecutor and to the courts, as the law says, instead of keeping me here for days wasting my time! As though I were a political prisoner! Who knows, they may even intern me in a village!"

"But wouldn't you prefer that to prison?" I asked.

The man looked at me in amazement. "Certainly not. Why should I? What is there for me to do in a village? Have you ever heard of anyone being smart enough to steal anything from a peasant? And what have they got you could steal, anyway?"

We laughed and agreed. George put another question: "Why were you arrested this time?"

Tseko drew himself up with great dignity. "I'm an innocent victim of the political situation."

We roared with laughter but he did not even smile as he added: "They arrested me on account of these bloody Germans."

He spat on the floor to emphasize his disgust and explained.

Ten days before he had managed to get into a "lovely flat" about three o'clock in the morning, "the most suitable hour" for his trade. The back door of the building (it was a huge apartment house) had been left unlocked by one of his girl friends ("Ugly as sin, brother, but very devoted to me and quite useful at times"). The girl was a servant in one of the flats. Not *this* flat, however, for that would have brought the girl under suspicion, which was against his principles. The kitchen door had been an easy job ("One of these foolproof locks, you know, which you can open with a toothpick") and nobody had heard him while he was at work in the sitting room. The owner of the flat was snoring so loudly that Tseko broke open one drawer without even bothering much about the noise. Finally, his pockets crammed with booty (under five thousand levas' worth of course), he tiptoed back to the kitchen. Five minutes more and he would have been safely out of the house in the blacked-out street. The blackout, by the way, was the only good thing these politicians had ever thought of. Yes, sir, he did approve of the blackout in spite of his hatred for all politicians, both those who were in prison and those who had sent him there. And then . . . then came the tragedy, which

made him a real martyr of the political conditions in the country. . . .

We were listening to the Pickpocket with great interest. He told his story in a simple charming way, seasoning it with all the oaths in his vocabulary and making at the same time gestures which reminded me of a clown in a circus. He was becoming more and more excited.

"Just as I was making my way to the door, I heard a suspicious noise. Yes, brother, a very suspicious noise. I realized at once what it was. There was someone outside trying to open the door with a skeleton key. That's interesting, I said to myself. It must be a colleague. Who else would sneak in by the kitchen door at this hour? Maybe it's Black Peter, I thought. That's a pal of mine who works in the same district. I stepped beside the cupboard and waited. Damn it, it couldn't be Black Peter! It must be a fresh bird, I thought. He didn't even know how to open the door properly, fiddling about like that. . . . And what do you suppose happened next?"

As we had no idea we kept a respectful silence.

"At last the bloody door flew open and three men rushed into the kitchen!"

"Colleagues?"

"Hell, no! They came into the flat flashing their torches in front of them. I could see they had revolvers in their hands. I didn't like it anyhow, and decided it was time for me to go. While they were busy shouting in the bedrooms I crept along the wall to the kitchen door. They hadn't seen me, of course. I opened the door noiselessly and . . ."

"What happened?"

"'Hands up!' two men shouted and stuck their guns into my ribs." The Pickpocket paused to gulp down some water from the jar in the corner. "It was the blasted

police," he continued. At first he had thought it was just his bad luck but when later he saw what the situation really was his indignation knew no bounds. The police had not come for him, but for the owner of the flat. A little while ago the Pickpocket had blessed him for his loud snores; now he cursed him. He was "one of those stupid politicians who are against the Government." The Pickpocket swore violently. "And you're surprised when I tell you I've no use for politicians! Why, if that old idiot hadn't been a politician, the police wouldn't have come at all, and I wouldn't be here now!"

The policeman hauled him back into the flat. "He was trying to escape," they said. Whereupon one of the plain-clothes men slapped him on the face. No, sir, his explanations were of no avail. It was in vain that he tried to prove who he was and how he had come to be there. He pointed to the broken drawer and emptied his pockets. But the plain-clothes man only retorted: "You can't fool me. That's a very old dodge. We know you're this fellow's accomplice." And he jerked his head toward a man in pajamas, who was trying to comfort his sobbing wife.

When at last they were all brought to the Police Building Tseko uttered a sigh of relief. After all, the Criminal Department knew him well, and he could rely on them to get him out of this stupid mess. But not a bit of it! For ten days they questioned him about all the senseless things under the sun. The snoring man had been writing leaflets against the Germans, they said, which he, Tseko, had distributed. Why on earth should he want to distribute leaflets, he of all people! Damn it all, he was a thief! That was that and he had no intention of changing his profession. They beat him, too. Just like a political prisoner. . . . There was no law in this country any more.

It was only the other day that they informed the Criminal Department of his arrest. Of course the Department recognized him immediately. "An old customer of ours," they said, but in spite of that the Political Department still insisted on his remaining in the building as their prisoner for further investigations. "The criminal policemen are jolly nice fellows, you know. They never beat you. When they catch you they send you to the courts. That's the law. But these swine in the Political are the scum of the earth!"

"They are," George said grimly.

"You are lucky to be a criminal," I added.

"Maybe, but you'll have to admit that I'm an innocent victim of this bloody political situation."

We admitted it.

The Pickpocket's story made us laugh out loud and took our minds off our worries. I couldn't help being amused by his genuine indignation at being denied his thief's status, and being suspected of "some political nonsense, you know." But his story helped me to understand something that had mystified me when I myself was arrested—how the policemen had entered my bedroom without my hearing a sound. Tseko gave me a detailed explanation of this new police technique. "They're afraid of resistance," he said, "and then if they ring the bell and wait for you to open the front door you have time to destroy all your papers. Besides you can refuse to let them in. You see, legally they aren't supposed to come during the night. It's a German system, damn it. . . ."

He talked unceasingly until lunchtime, and when a policeman opened the door and threw us five loaves of bread, our daily ration, he shouted that he wasn't a politi-

cal prisoner and that according to the prison regulations, they should give him something more to eat. The policeman slammed the door without deigning to reply and the Pickpocket was soon eating greedily but still complaining bitterly between mouthfuls: "Never before have I been treated like this! Ten days of bread and water! It's against the law! If only the Criminal Department . . ."

He was still cursing when, after our "lunch," we went for our "afternoon walk," which consisted of walking up and down the cell for half an hour. This, together with our exercises in the morning, was a regular feature of our daily program. The Pickpocket was reluctantly obliged to walk, too, for there would have been no room if he had remained spread out on the floor. During the walk we were silent, which was another trying experience for him. He regained his spirits later when we started our usual game—throwing dice made out of pellets of bread. The Pickpocket won. George looked at him suspiciously. "I swear I don't use any tricks!" the Pickpocket protested, but George held the opposite view. In the middle of their argument the iron door was opened and my name was called.

"Cross-examination," whispered George. "I know that man who's come to fetch you. Good luck! And don't forget what I told you."

I walked to the door and looked at the man who was standing there. He had a dingy sallow complexion and a cigarette end stuck to his upper lip. Without removing it he grunted:

"Follow me!"

I walked down the corridor beside him and turned to the right. The sentries looked at us with bored blank

faces as we disappeared up the staircase. It was very cold.  
"Here!"

We stopped at the second floor and entered a big hall with several doors leading out of it. The man opened the third door to the right.

My first impression of the room we entered was that it was hazy with smoke. Facing the door were two huge windows. There was a big desk to the right with several leather armchairs scattered round it. A bookcase covered the whole wall to my left. Two men were sitting in the armchairs, smoking. A third was walking round the room. He stopped and looked at me. I recognized the broad fat face, the funny haircut and the little gray mustache.

It was Herr Drexler, Herr Julius Drexler of the Gestapo.

## CHAPTER III

### *Why I Didn't Kill Hitler*

I FEEL a sort of repugnance toward all "torture stories," so much that I am no longer either impressed or moved by detailed descriptions of all the devilish devices employed in the technique of terror. Many people are, I think, in that position. They have had too much of it. They are tired of reading about the atrocious sufferings endured by their fellow men, the more so because such sufferings are so far beyond the realm of ordinary experience as to seem unreal, and a great effort of the imagination is required if one is to visualize them at all. They evoke no familiar pictures in mind or memory.

The average man outside the terror land of the Nazi New Order takes one of two views in regard to these torture stories. He may dismiss them as "war propaganda" and disbelieve them as such—either genuinely, or out of an unconscious escapism from the moral indignation he thinks he ought to feel. Or he may ignore them as gruesome and boring, and simply not read them. That is natural enough. After so many years of horrors public interest is dulled, and for almost everyone war and its consequences are terrible enough in themselves without courting, in books and newspapers, further demands on one's sympathy.

For this reason I have always been reluctant to describe my own experiences at the hands of Herr Drexler of the

Gestapo and his associates in Sofia. They have built up there a terror system which is more or less the same as that which exists in every European country under German control. I passed through it, but I am only one of hundreds and thousands of men and women who have been through the same experience with the Gestapo, and one of the millions of human beings in the world who have had directly to suffer the awful consequences of war. No one can convince me that it is harder to spend four months, for instance, in a Nazi concentration camp than to fight without respite for four months, say, at Stalingrad. I think I have the right to say this, having passed through every stage of the Nazi torture machine.

On the other hand I do want to warn people against the "it's-only-propaganda" attitude. The Nazi hell does exist and no human pen can translate even a fraction of its terrors. History does not record blacker deeds than those perpetrated by the Germans in Poland and occupied Russia, not to mention the rest of Europe which, comparatively, has suffered less. The brutality of the Nazi is greater than any the most ingenious propaganda could invent. I remember my annoyance when I talked to British officers in Egypt who had seen many German officers and men in battle and later as prisoners of war, and who tried to convince me that "Jerry's a decent fellow," and that his reported cruelty must be just propaganda. Many of them were taken in by the nice table manners of captured German officers and also by their friendly treatment of certain British prisoners who later had escaped. (The latter might be attributed to propaganda with greater justification!)

Jerry is *not* a decent fellow. An ancient proverb says that you can judge the true character of a man when you

give him power. A Nazi in power is nothing but a beast, even though in prison he may be as docile as a lamb. The Nazi is a mad dog, and against mad dogs there is only one means of offense—death.

I felt I could gladly kill Herr Drexler as he stood there before me, politely explaining why he expected me to tell him everything. That is to say everything that I knew about the "Anglo-American" secret services in Bulgaria. I told him that I knew nothing, which was true. He replied that he had the power to sentence me to death, which was equally true. "All British and American foreign correspondents are in the pay of the Secret Service," he said. "It's a fact and we can prove it."

Herr Drexler was speaking Bulgarian, which he spoke to perfection, but from time to time, when he did not want the two other men present to understand what he was saying, he would burst into bad English. His methods of interrogation were simple. He would make an accusation, produce a few "proofs" in support of it and point out that really my case was hopeless but—there was always that "but"—if I wished to save my skin and to spare myself other methods guaranteed to make me speak, I need only confess my sins and throw myself on his mercy. It was as simple as that. From time to time he showed me photographs of some person, known or unknown, with the invariable question: "What do you think of him? He was one of your friends, wasn't he?"

I only began to get really annoyed late in the afternoon. I asked for a glass of water. Herr Drexler shook his head and explained with a gentle smile that he might leave me without food or water for as long as it suited him. His voice was soft, almost tender, as he added: "Don't fool

yourself that you're tough. Take my advice. Remember that it is not possible, that it is absolutely not possible to refuse to speak when once we have decided to make you speak. You should realize that and confess."

The idiotic part was that I had nothing to confess. I had never been a member of the British Secret Service, nor of the American, about which I knew nothing. But Drexler had other ideas. He said that Colonel Donovan was at the head of the entire American Secret Service and asked:

"What instructions did he give you when you saw him last?"

I was amused at that. Colonel Donovan had visited Sofia on January 20, as part of the famous Balkan and European tour which he made in the winter of 1940-1941 as President Roosevelt's personal representative. Together with all the other foreign correspondents I was introduced to him by the American Minister, George H. Earle, and I think I saw him twice in all. He gave us his impressions of the country and some information as to the nature of his visit, all of which I incorporated in my dispatches. I explained this to Drexler but it did not satisfy him. He attacked Earle in the most violent terms. "He too belongs to the Secret Service!" he screamed. "We know all about his nefarious activities in Vienna.\* He acted then as liaison between Dollfuss and the White House and now he's running all the American spy organizations in the Balkans."

For an hour the interrogation revolved round George Earle. I was given several plans of the American Legation and of Earle's private house and was asked if the furniture was distributed exactly as it was on the plan. I was very much surprised that the police should show such interest

\* Earle was American Minister in Vienna when Dollfuss was Chancellor.

in American activities, in view of the fact that at that time neither Germany nor Bulgaria was at war with the United States.

At 10:00 P.M.—the cross-examination had begun at 2:00—Drexler and his assistants departed. I was left alone in the room with a young policeman whose instructions were to watch over me while I compiled my “confession.” He was a nice boy, and when I asked for a glass of water he fetched me a cup of coffee and two very welcome ham sandwiches. When I told him that I had nothing to write he took me back to the cell.

I was so exhausted that I lay down on the floor and fell asleep at once.

In the Sofia Police Prison cross-examinations were known by the French word *séance*. Within the next few days I had three more séances, all equally unfruitful from the police's point of view. George had one; he was unconscious when he was brought back from it. He had been upstairs in the “Dentist's Laboratory,” which was the slang term for the room where all the scientific torture took place. Unscientific torture—beating in all its forms—was practiced throughout the building.

At midnight, some days later, I was myself taken to the Dentist's Lab, together with George and the other two men in our cell (the Pickpocket had been removed that morning). On the way up George whispered advice into my ear: “Faint as soon as you can or pretend you've fainted. That's the only way. They only leave you alone when you show no sign of life.”

We undressed in a small anteroom. Making someone strip is one of the oldest and cleverest tricks. Dressed, you feel, in some obscure way, that you can rely on your

clothes. Without them you are helpless. You are cut off from the outside world, symbolized to you by your shirt, your tie, your trousers. The fact that you can't put your hands in your pockets assumes an enormous importance. You realize to the full the extent of your own powerlessness.

While undressing I had time to probe into my feelings, which I did with a sort of distant impersonal curiosity. I decided I was not really afraid, but that does not quite describe the reaction. I felt a remote fear which I recognized as part of that curious feeling which sometimes overtakes you in times of danger and which I had experienced more than once. You feel perfectly calm and anyone who saw you would call you courageous. It is not courage, however, but a strange absence of the outward, physical symptoms of fear. Your nerves have been strained to the utmost and beyond and you are no longer aware of them. You feel drained of all emotion. You see a revolver leveled at your head or your best friend killed before your eyes, and you feel nothing. You appear quite normal, you walk and speak and listen without any effort at self-control, and without being in any way responsible for your actions.

The Dentist's Lab was a large room brightly lighted by powerful electric lamps suspended from the ceiling. At first sight it looked more like a gymnasium than anything else. Leather straps hung from the walls. There were several high tables. Hooks and various other gadgets stuck out of the floor and at the end of the room there were several chairs, not unlike dentists' chairs (hence the nickname) with leather straps attached to their arms and backs.

There were ten other men in the room, all naked. Four

or five plain-clothes men were strolling around. Not a word was uttered. Suddenly a hoarse scream rent the air. We turned and saw a starved-looking man who was shouting hysterically: "Take me away! Take me away! I'll talk. I swear I'll talk." It was a ghastly sight. His shrieks came in spasms, like vomit, and shook his whole frame. Yet I registered all this without a tremor of pity or anger, without even curiosity. I noticed too that none of the other prisoners showed any sign of fear or disgust; they were passive observers of an event which, in ordinary circumstances, would have made their hair stand on end.

The man was taken away, still screaming.

"Mad or pretending to be," George whispered. I had not realized until then that he was standing next to me.

The lights went off, but the room was still lighted feebly by small lamps on the walls. In the half-darkness I saw two men grab hold of one of the naked figures and carry him away into one of the corners. It was dark there and I could no longer see him but soon I heard him. There was a strange noise as though a stick were being flung through the air (only later did I realize that this was the sound the rubber whip makes), echoed by the noise of muffled breathless sobs. These were followed by curses and screams with, always in the background, the motif of the whip, ever increasing, as the cries did, in volume and violence. . . .

Two more men approached the group and singled out another naked figure. But this time the figure, with a loud inhuman yell, flung himself against the two men and succeeded in hitting one of them so hard in the stomach that he fell to the ground. The naked figure fell, too. We lost no time and rushed with the other prisoners into the fray. . . . Three or four shots rang out, the lights were

put on and my memories flounder in the confusion of screams, curses and blows that followed.

Thus we emerged more or less unscathed from the Dentist's Lab. Or so we considered next morning when we examined ourselves. George had a black eye and I didn't feel too bad either, though my right leg was rather painful and I could barely walk. "Was it from the chair?" George asked, but I was unable to answer him. The events of the previous night were so confused in my mind that I could not remember what had happened and what had not.

The other two men from our cell did not return. They were taken from the Dentist's Lab into the cellar where they were killed. They were thrown into the "Big Berta." "Big Berta" is prison slang for the enormous furnace which stands in the Sofia Police Prison cellar. Its door is as big as the door of an ordinary car. Its attendants are gypsies—rascals who hang about all the prisons in the country and who, in exchange for a few leva, act as hangmen. Their number depends on the political situation. If the Government is so unpopular that it decides to get really tough, the gypsy bands invade the Police Building, where normally no executions take place. Nominally they are employed there as cleaners and floor sweepers, but the people in the quarter know the true meaning of their reappearance—work for Big Berta. The Big Berta was introduced by the government headed by Professor Alexander Tsankov who, in 1923, killed the Prime Minister Stamboliyski and then, backed by King Boris, by a group of army officers and by the Macedonian terrorist organizations, proclaimed himself Prime Minister. Two of Stamboliyski's ministers disappeared into Big Berta's jaws. Since then, fortunately, this barbaric system had been in

abeyance: it needed the Germans to bring Big Berta to life again.

I had several more séances during the next few days. A whole afternoon was spent going over my *Times* dispatches, and I was required to divulge my different sources of information. I couldn't give away any of my colleagues nor my Left Wing friends, many of whom had been extremely helpful to me and had put me on to first-class stories more than once. Finally I was told that as so much of the information in my articles had been against the Germans I would be tried by a German court-martial. I pointed out that I was on Bulgarian territory and insisted on being tried by a Bulgarian court. Drexler fell back on his usual tactics of ponderous sarcasm: "We won't be able to give you that pleasure."

Next morning his Bulgarian assistant—Pavel Pavlov, the Chief of the Political Secret Police—was present at the cross-examination. "Why do you think Britain is going to win the war?" I was asked. I replied that my reasons were numerous and complicated. "Write them down," Drexler ordered. I said I had no objection and spent the rest of the morning doing so. I wrote over three thousand words under the heading, "Why Britain Will Win the War." I handed that document to Pavlov, who glanced at it and smiled.

"I'm sorry we can't publish it."

"I'm sorrier still," I retorted, and was taken back to my cell.

Finally one evening, during another séance, Drexler leaned forward across his desk and shot a question which staggered me:

"Why didn't you kill Hitler?"

For a moment I thought that he, or more probably I, had gone mad. (It was not so very long after my visit to the Dentist's Lab.) Then he explained, and while I listened I realized that the Gestapo was a far more efficient organization than I had ever dreamed it was.

10:30 A.M. and my third aspirin. It was the worst headache I had ever had and Adolf Hitler was responsible for it. I had been present at a two-hour nonstop shouting bout—men, women, children, blackshirts, brownshirts—and my ears and head were throbbing their protest.

"You've got to see Hitler from close to," my friend Polich had said two days before, and he set off on the long obstacle race leading to the necessary permits.

Berlin, April 1939. On the twentieth Hitler had ordered "the biggest military parade in the history of the world" to celebrate his fiftieth birthday. Herds of statesmen, ambassadors, ministers and special representatives from all over the world were invited to be present at it. I was a member of a group of Balkan journalists—editors of Belgrade, Athens, Bucharest and Sofia papers—who had also been invited there for the occasion, and I must say that apart from the official celebrations we had a very good time. It was my first visit to Berlin. I liked the city, and I decided to stay on a couple of weeks after the ceremonies had ended and the delegations had gone home.

At that time you had only to spend ten days in Berlin to witness the same number of official ceremonies. In May the Italian Foreign Minister, Ciano, arrived to sign the famous Iron Pact which laid the foundations of the infamous Axis. I stayed to cover the news. More celebration, parades, gala performances at the Opera. We shook hands with Ribbentrop, looking more sinister than usual,

and with Ciano, looking as ridiculous as usual, in the hall of the Wilhelmstrasse where they announced the signature of their great alliance. At the end of the month Prince Paul of Yugoslavia arrived on a state visit. The Bulgarian Prime Minister George Kiosseivanov followed him in June. Parades, celebrations, official dinners, rumors, telephone calls, the peace of the world, the genius of the Fuehrer . . . Enough to make any journalist giddy.

Prince Paul, as head of the Yugoslav state, was to be welcomed by Hitler himself at the Anhalter Bahnhof, and that was why Polich had suggested we should go to the station and see him "close to." I wasn't particularly enthusiastic; I had seen too many politicians jump out of trains to be thrilled at the prospect of another long wait in a drafty station. But Polich assured me that I would not regret it and he was quite right. We had to be there, our pockets full of permits, one hour before the time at which the Fuehrer was scheduled to arrive. That meant that we were obliged to allow another hour for threading our way through the endless cordons of S.S. and special troops on guard for miles round the Anhalter Bahnhof. We arrived eventually, five minutes before the appointed time. But there, despite our profusion of permits, we had none that was of any avail. However, Herr Amtsrat Giese from the Propaganda Ministry, whose task it was to look after all the foreign correspondents, was there waiting for us and he escorted us to the platform.

The station was magnificently decorated with flowers and flags. It was empty but for the side alleys where thousands of children, roped off by a cordon of S.S. guards, were assembled. Each child was armed with the flags of Yugoslavia and Germany, one in each hand, and had a basket full of sandwiches strapped to his back, to take the

place of lunch. For the children had been there since seven that morning, and all the streets through which Hitler was to pass were lined with children too. It was all perfectly organized. There were nurses and ambulances at hand to deal with the children who fainted, and quite a large proportion of them did faint.

I nearly fainted myself, in spite of my three aspirins. In shifts the children yelled and shouted, and the noise was so deafening one could not hear oneself think. It continued for one hour and became even more hellish when the Nazi notables began to arrive. The whole gang was there—Goebbels, Ribbentrop, Raeder, Hess, Neurath (in Party uniform for the first time), Brauschitsch, Keitel, Himmler and finally Goering. They lined up in readiness. We, a group of not more than twenty journalists, stood just behind them and there was no one—no S.S. and no police—between them and us. The shouting outside the station became more frantic, I swallowed another aspirin, the Nazi leaders drew themselves up, the children waved their flags—the Fuehrer!

He walked slowly toward us, followed by a dozen men of his personal bodyguard, his forearm flung back in salute. He began shaking hands with his assistants and it was comic to see these Nazi gangsters standing as stiffly at attention in front of him as a company of infantry being reviewed by a general. I happened to be just behind Marshal (then General) Keitel when Hitler stopped and talked to him for ten minutes, so I was able to have a good look at this second Attila. I was staring at him with such interest that I did not notice, until he moved away, how two of his bodyguard came and stood on either side of me. I was frankly astonished. There was nothing impressive about this short flabby man with his big cap perched too

far forward, his ridiculous mustache, his girlish overwhite complexion and his artificial laughter. For a moment I thought it must be one of the much publicized doubles and not the great Fuehrer himself. . . .

The train steamed into the station. Goering made the introductions and Hitler greeted Prince Paul. Frau Goering next to lovely Princess Olga looked more than ever like a clumsy German cook. A military band played the Yugoslav national anthem but the shouting was so loud that not a note of it could be heard. Having exhausted my supply of aspirins, I declined to join the procession in one of the cars reserved for the press, and I left the station on foot, together with Polich.

"Was it worth while?" he asked.

"Certainly. At least it proves one thing."

"What?"

"That it would not be impossible to kill Hitler. I could have killed him myself."

Polich smiled:

"Why didn't you? Your fame would be assured. You'd go down in history. . . ."

"Who knows? Maybe one day I'll be sorry I didn't have a go at it."

"Not to mention the headline of your possible confession, 'Why I Killed Hitler.' A front-page story in every paper in the world."

"And as it is, all I can write is 'Why I Didn't Kill Hitler.' Which wouldn't make a front-page story anywhere."

Polich laughed and we got on a bus.

"We have proofs that that day you expressed regret that you did not kill Hitler," Drexler continued, "and you

added that if you had a second opportunity you would not miss it."

"Do you mean to say that you really take that story seriously?"

"As an indication of your state of mind, yes. One doesn't joke about such things."

It was not a very pleasant séance.

Another séance was devoted to the University of Illinois. My passport had an American visa and in my files they had found correspondence of mine with the university, including a telegram stating that I was accepted there for postgraduate work on journalism. (As a matter of fact I was scheduled to leave Sofia and go to the United States three days after my arrest, and my trunks were already packed.) Drexler thought there must be something sinister and mysterious about Illinois. So he brought a huge map of the United States to see whether really the university town existed, or my telegram was simply a Secret Service trick. I showed him the town—Urbana. He read the telegram through several times and then asked me how on earth did I think I could go to America, as the U-boats had made it impossible to cross the Atlantic. So we began talking about U-boats, convoys and naval affairs. Then he started a terrible outcry against the American universities in general—they were run by the Jews, he said, and anyhow wasn't Wilson, who had cheated Germany, a university professor? I realized it was hopeless to argue and kept silent.

Two days later George was again taken to the Dentist's Lab but I remained behind. Then the Pickpocket was brought back for one night. We were amused by his ac-

count of how he had finally "confessed" to having distributed the leaflets which the stupid snoring politician had written. "I refuse to be beaten up indefinitely. So one day I told them I'd confess. They asked me to write down on what day the man actually gave me the leaflets. So I just invented a date and that put an end to the whole stupid business."

He was taken out of the cell next morning. That same night, at about one, George and I were taken out too. At that late hour we thought it could only mean the Dentist's Laboratory. But instead we were led into the courtyard. It was a bitterly cold night, March 13. Our hands were chained and we were thrown into a lorry.

"What is all this?" I asked George.

"Either they're taking us to some other prison or else they'll bump us off when we get outside the town. What is known as 'shot while trying to escape.' "

It was not a very cheering prospect. The lorry swerved and we hit our heads against the roof. We both swore loudly. The lorry increased its speed.

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Reichswehr Marches*

THE lorry stopped and we were led into the back yard of the Sofia railway-station Police Building. About eighty other men were assembled there already, all in chains. We renewed our acquaintance with the Pickpocket from a distance; he was over in the far corner shouting violent but unfortunately to them incomprehensible abuse at a group of German soldiers who stood there gaping at us. That was the last time I saw him.

Half of us were taken out onto the platform and packed into a car of a German military train marked "prisoners." At first it seemed that we were in an ordinary third-class car, but then we noticed that the windows were covered over with wire netting and after we had all crowded in, the doors were locked from the outside. Policemen stood guard in the corridors and soon the train steamed out of the station. We were going south but we had no means of knowing whether our destination was to be another prison, a concentration camp or death. The night seemed endless. We took turns sitting down but none of us was able to snatch enough sleep to quench our physical and nervous fatigue.

Next morning we arrived at Plovdiv. Still in chains, we were dragged into the railway Police Prison where we waited for the further contingents of prisoners that were due to arrive by later trains.

We noticed that the policemen with us were engrossed in little booklets which they had pulled out of their pockets. I wondered what these could be and asked to see one. It was a simple German grammar for beginners followed by a German-Bulgarian dictionary, in a well-printed clothbound pocket edition. I later discovered that every policeman and every soldier in the country had been presented by the German authorities with a free copy of this. So were all officials and students. George and I calculated that over a million copies were being distributed and we were reluctantly obliged to admit that this was a really clever piece of propaganda.

While still in that filthy cell, we had another glimpse into the technique of propaganda. There were ten Plovdiv students there who had been arrested for distributing anti-German leaflets and for chalking up anti-German slogans on the walls of the town. They were members of the Workers' Party and after they had been brought into the cell they wasted no time in scrawling "Down with Boris," "Down with Fascism," "Out with the Germans," all over the walls. George and I went over to talk to them. They knew who George was and so the inevitable distrust, which is the first reaction of every prisoner toward another, was quickly dispelled. "For the first ten nights after the Germans arrived," one of them explained, "we flooded the town with leaflets and left no stone unturned—or rather unscrawled on. Just three or four words—the shorter the better. Lengthy leaflets are no good either. A leaflet should make a quick impression—one must be able to take in its meaning in one glance. After all, what is propaganda? Propaganda is publicity. When you advertise a certain brand of cigarettes you don't indulge in a scientific discourse on the growth of tobacco. You simply state that

your blend of cigarette is the best, the mildest, the richest in flavor or whatnot. One or two sentences endlessly repeated do the trick."

At ten that morning George, a man from Burgas and I were taken out of the cell and pushed into a train bound for Assenovgrad. Assenovgrad is a little town fifteen miles to the south of Plovdiv. My heart sank for I knew that there were no prisons in that part of the country, and if the official intention had been to intern us in the village the guards would have told us.

"We're headed for a concentration camp," George muttered. I shivered; until then concentration camps had not existed in Bulgaria and for me the term still carried the unreal ring of hearsay. As if he had deciphered my thoughts George added:

"These camps are an inevitable part of the German system. They follow in the *Reichswehr's* wake just as the supply services do."

The railway ran parallel to the main road and through the window we watched the German troops marching down it, and the tanks and trucks rumbling along ahead of them. As far as the eye could see the fields were thick with heavy guns and tanks, and still more tanks. Crowds of them, coated in the drab menace of their battle paint, stretching right to the horizon. Overhead Messerschmitts and Stukas hissed their noisy salute. The antiaircraft posts were few and far between. Both George and I were impressed by the almost complete lack of defenses. We pointed this out to the police officer who accompanied us.

"The R.A.F. will bomb all this to hell," George said. Neither of us was aware that this was simply wishful thinking.

"The R.A.F. in Greece is much too weak," the policeman retorted. "The Germans will smash it."

This brings me to what I personally consider one of Britain's noblest actions in this war, one of those which has suffered most from British virtuosity in understatement and which consequently is perhaps not fully appreciated in Britain and America. I am speaking of the British participation in the Balkan campaign, which was wholly glorious in the belief of one who prizes some defeats higher than victories. In my opinion this campaign should rank high in the annals of British history.

When Britain, in the first months of 1941, sent troops to Greece, she did so unsustained by expectation or hope of victory. Victory was impossible, for the Germans had overwhelming superiority, not only in the air but also on land, both in numbers and equipment. And they had in reserve the gigantic army that was to attack Russia that summer. Yet Britain sent her troops—according to official figures, about 60,000 in all—all the troops she could spare and more—to the aid of Greece, although this in no way conformed to British interests, for it meant the surrender of British gains in Libya.

"The decision to help Greece with all means at our disposal meant calling a halt to the victorious Libyan offensive and the withdrawal of a large proportion of the Army of the Nile. It was virtually a surrender of Libya to enable us to keep our promise to Greece and, if future historians ever need an example of how Britain honours her plighted word, they have it here. . . . If blood must be the price of a pledge between nations, then the Navy was

destined later to pay it in full measure."\* So was the army, the small army of British, Australians and New Zealanders who, in April 1941, fought one of the most uneven battles of all times.

On April 6 the Germans entered Greece—not through Bulgaria, as was expected, but through the Vardar valley from Yugoslavia. There the Greek frontier was not well protected, and the Germans were able without difficulty to push through to Salonika while the Greeks were still gallantly withstanding other German attacks in the fortified zone of their northern frontier with Bulgaria. Thus in the very first days the entire Greek army east of the Vardar was cut off, and the Greek army in the west, the army that had advanced into Albania, was in much the same plight; while it was still fighting the Italians, it was attacked in the rear by the Germans. And from then on the whole brunt of the fighting fell onto the shoulders of the B.E.F. Only those who saw, as I saw, the terrifying concentration of German strength that was afterward flung at the tiny B.E.F. can gauge the heroism of those soldiers and those airmen. I can only hope that after the war the story of this second Dunkirk will be told in full.

Eventually we arrived at Assenovgrad. George and I were taken to the local police prison where we were provided with an escort of six armed guards and told to clear out at once. I was too tired to argue and we shuffled out without protest. The guards were quite friendly and advised us to hire a mule to carry our suitcases. "It's a long walk," one of them warned us. He was Peter Tsvet-

\* *East of Malta, West of Suez*, the Admiralty account of the naval war in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1939-1941, H.M. Stationery Office, London, March 1943.

kov, who later became one of our most trusted friends. He allowed us to have a last blowout in the local inn and there he explained where we were going. A new camp had been founded up in the mountains for the benefit of the "most dangerous political elements." He was frank with us and admitted that it was not a pleasant place. He enlarged enough on the subject to depress us thoroughly, but we could not help being touched by his kindness. As we set off he murmured:

"Smoke as much as you can now. Up there it's forbidden."

When we reached the path through the forest which led to the camp Tsvetkov spoke again:

"Don't tell anyone that you hired a mule. You'll only get into trouble with the Beast."

"Who's the Beast?"

"The Police Chief in Assenovgrad," he admitted.

We climbed for six hours, in silence most of the way. We had plenty to think about, George and I. Finally we heard dogs barking in the distance.

"It's here," Tsvetkov said. "On the other side of the hill."

We took our suitcases and the peasant from whom we had hired the mule turned back toward the valley. I lighted a cigarette and puffed at it conscientiously but without enjoyment. We walked on and soon we saw spikes of barbed wire ominously outlined against their white background of snow.

## CHAPTER V

### *Where Homer Once Lived*

THE dogs were still barking savagely as our escorts led us into what looked like a tiny mountain hut. The room we entered had several hundred rifles propped up against the walls, and guarding the door were two machine guns. "Come on," George joked, "let's go and shoot some Germans." Peter Tsvetkov laughed heartily, but I felt depressed and tired.

We stayed in the arsenal room more than half an hour before five uniformed policemen came to relieve our escort. Peter gave us a friendly wink as he went out.

"Undress!" one of the newcomers ordered, then catching sight of the gleam of terror in our eyes (there is nothing a prisoner fears more than this order, usually the prelude to beating or torture), he added more gently: "Don't worry, we're only going to search your clothes."

Which they proceeded to do for over an hour. Our suitcases and bags were opened and every object, however insignificant, was carefully scrutinized by the five policemen. I have never before seen such a thorough search. My shaving brush was broken to pieces, the soles of George's new winter boots were wrenched off and my two overcoats looked as they had at the first fitting in the tailor's shop—seams ripped down the middle and the sleeves torn off. A small cake of Sunlight Soap which we had bought in the town that morning was cut into tiny

fragments. As we stood there stark naked two of the policemen came to examine our bodies. "The only place they haven't looked in is my stomach," George remarked.

When we had dressed we were taken out and shown into another room, as small as the first, with one simple table and two or three wooden chairs. Two big photographs hung on the walls: Hitler and King Boris. A red-faced man with small sluggish eyes and black hair neatly scraped away from his low forehead, wearing the uniform of a Captain of the Police Force, was seated at the desk. Next to him sat a fair young man in German officer's uniform sucking at a pipe.

With a significant smile the Police Captain opened two files which he had taken from the table, glanced through the papers they contained and handed them to the German. He read them, smiling too, and, from time to time, looking up at us. I was completely apathetic except for my determination not to give them the satisfaction of displaying anger or emotion.

The police officer broke the silence.

"You'll be acquainted later with the camp regulations. There's only one thing I want to tell you now. If you have any plans for escape you'd better say good-by to them here and now. The camp is extremely well guarded, as you will see for yourselves. What is more, I have the authority to deal on the spot with any . . . difficulties that might arise. There's only one punishment for attempting to escape and that is a bullet through the heart. That will be all for the time being."

The camp was situated just below the four-thousand-foot-high peak of Bezevo which overlooks the towns of

Assenovgrad and Plovdiv (Philippopolis) and the greater part of the Thracian valley. It is one of the loveliest spots in the Rodopi mountains where, according to the legend, Homer was born. With the exception of the Bosnian mountains in Yugoslavia and the Albanian hills, it is perhaps the least known and least visited region of the Balkan peninsula. The nearest village, Bachkovo, is down in the valley, about six hours on foot from the camp. Only a steep mountain path connects the camp with the outside world and not even a peasant cart can venture up it. Mules were used for transporting our food supplies and even the policemen's horses met with great difficulties on their way to the camp.

The camp was called Gonda Voda after the spring of sparkling fresh mountain water in the forest near the building. In all Slav languages *voda* means water, and *Gonda*, according to the legend, was the name of a handsome and courageous shepherd who lived there "once upon a time." He was not a shepherd by birth, but a prince in exile. His father, the merciless ruler of a powerful kingdom, had ordered his death. For Gonda, because he loved a beautiful peasant girl, had refused to marry the ugly princess whom his father had chosen for him. So Gonda fled away from his father, away from his riches, away from his kingdom, and went to live in the wild forests of the Rodopi mountains, where he became a shepherd. The tunes he played on his shepherd's pipe were very beautiful but very sad, for they were in tune with his heart. He could not forget his beautiful peasant love. He sat on a stone and played his pipe as he watched his sheep grazing peacefully round him. One day he was so unhappy that tears came to his eyes and fell from his cheeks onto the grass by the stone. And these tears were the wonderful waters of

the Gonda spring. The prince died but his tears lived after him for ever and ever. . . .

Certainly Gonda's tears were the only nice thing we tasted while we were in the camp. Our meals consisted of small platefuls of watery bean soup and two thin slices of bread for lunch and dinner. In the mornings we had only bread and hot water, which George persisted in calling tea. This was of course quite inadequate and we were always hungry. Moreover, most of us had come from the Sofia Police Prison where for days or, in the case of some, for weeks we had lived on bread and water.

But worse even than the food was the humiliating way in which it was doled out—a German system, needless to say. At six-thirty, twelve-thirty and again at six-thirty in the evening the camp bell rang. The prisoners paraded in the central yard of the camp for roll call, after which we proceeded to the "dining room"—a corner of the yard sheltered by two enormous pine trees. The policemen on duty brought out the soup in pails—one pail for every twelve prisoners—which they dumped down on the packing cases that served as tables. One man from each group would ladle out the soup into the twelve tin plates we handed toward him. The bread was distributed in the same way. Then, clustered round the pail, we would gulp down the soup as fast as we could, for the cold was so intense that otherwise it would have frozen as we stood there. As it was, the wind filled our plates with snow. Out of curiosity I looked at my watch to see how long it took us to have our lunch. The average was from fifty to seventy seconds, from the command "begin" to the command "stop." We were not allowed to begin until the policeman on duty in the "dining room" shouted: "Begin!" And when we had finished it was forbidden to leave

until he gave the order: "Stop." At first this procedure irritated me so much that I could hardly eat, but after a few days I became so hardened to it that my only concern was, once the pail had arrived, to persuade the man who distributed the soup to let me have an extra big portion.

Dostoevski defined man as "the only animal that gets used to everything," and I often thought of his words during my first days in the camp. Had I read in a book or newspaper that men could live in the conditions we lived in, had someone told me that it was possible to exist for days and even weeks on bread and water in a small cell, to be beaten every other day and yet to survive, I would not have believed it. Nothing impressed me any more, and like the others a few crumbs of extra comfort were the sum of my ambition. Organizing an expedition to steal a loaf or two of bread from the policeman's building and the means of ensuring for oneself the largest share in the loot became problems infinitely more important than those of war and peace in Europe. To smuggle into our dormitory some firewood for the stove was the cardinal object of the day and seemed worth the risk of the policeman's whip or even of his bullet.

Our dormitory was a big square room in one of the buildings reserved for prisoners. We slept on the floor and each one of us had about three feet of sleeping space allotted to him. In the summer it was unbearable, but in the winter it had its advantages—it was less cold. The windows were so badly built that the wind blew the snow right into the room. We tried somehow to fill the gaps with socks and handkerchiefs but the wind always won through. We begged for newspapers or paper to use for the same purpose but that was against the camp regula-

tions: newspapers, however old, were strictly forbidden and so was paper of any kind.

When George and I arrived at the camp there were only forty-seven prisoners. Another prisoner arrived the same evening, which enabled us to assume the title of "the first fifty" of which we became very proud. At the beginning of April our number rose to one hundred and then rapidly to two, three and five hundred. By the end of May we were six hundred, and when at the end of August the camp was attacked by a group of guerrillas there were over one thousand prisoners in it. Bulgarians, Rumanians, Greeks, Albanians, Serbs, Croats, Czechs, Russians, Jews—the prisoners were in fact a miniature League of Nations . . . with the difference that we all lived together in perfect harmony. Even the Red and the White Russians forgot their ideological quarrel in their common quest for food and warmth.

The *doyen* of the camp—St. Peter as we called him—was an eighty-six-year-old Norwegian, and really an impressive figure, tall and spare with the vitality of a young man. His name was Hans Gylmaiden and he spoke Russian, French, German and English as well as he did Norwegian. Before the last war he had represented a British Shipping firm in Novorossiisk. After the Russian Revolution he settled in the Bulgarian Black Sea port of Varna and later became Norwegian consul there. His house on the sea front where he had both his consulate and his business offices had the misfortune of being one of the nicest houses in Varna, and so naturally the Germans took it over, sending him, his wife, his nephew and his sixty-year-old Russian secretary to the camp. This Russian was an interesting man. He still believed in Imperial Russia but was none

the less very tolerant toward the "Reds," probably because he was convinced that they were nothing more than a temporary phenomenon in the history of Russia. He was violently anti-German, unlike the majority of White Russians in the Balkans, particularly in Belgrade where, blind to wider issues, they acted as fifth columnists and did untold harm to a nation which had shown them unlimited hospitality. But all the White Russians in our camp were definitely Red White Russians as opposed to the White White (pro-German) Russians. They disliked the Bolsheviks, but had you dared suggest that there was a possibility Nazi Germany might defeat Communist Russia, they would have sneered at you in disgust. According to them the Russian soldier was before all else a Russian soldier, and as such infinitely superior to the German. Whether his uniform bore a Red Star or an Imperial badge was, after all, only of secondary importance.

The camp was international in spirit as well as in origin. For the sake of convenience prisoners were divided into groups, not according to their nationality but according to their convictions, which I consider a very advanced method of differentiation and one that does us credit. Thus our dormitory was known as the "House of Lords" because all of us in it were pro-British. Our *doyen* was a Croat, an Italian subject, but as allergic to Mussolini as he was to the camp soup. He had a beard and was therefore, inevitably, christened Balbo. The next dormitory to ours was the "Red Hall" where the members of the Workers Party slept. Then came the "Gypsy Headquarters," housing all miscellaneous elements, and the "Ministerial Room" where all the big shots—former ministers, senior officers, diplomats and party leaders—were installed. The other buildings were subdivided in a similar manner, the only

nonpolitical dormitory being the "Big Lice Hall" which was far from big but had the distinction of sheltering the largest lice in the whole camp.

The atmosphere became very agitated in the middle of April when our friends outside obtained permission to send us food parcels. Out of several hundred prisoners only twenty or thirty received food parcels regularly and this of course created great inequality in the distribution of supplies. Thus food raids were organized. After lengthy negotiations, a group from one dormitory would ally itself with a group from another and together they would rob the food parcels from a third. No dormitory neglected to have one or two men permanently on guard in the room—usually those who were reported sick—but these precautions were of little avail. Several of these raids were reported to the Police Chief, but he merely shrugged his shoulders and pointed out that he had been opposed to the sending of food parcels from the first. His superiors and not he had given permission for it.

I was astounded to observe the effect of prison life on human beings. Self-sacrifice and egotism, ruthlessness and nobility of heart and character, cruelty and idealism alternate from hour to hour. It is said that the true side of man's nature emerges when he is in bad material conditions, when there is no law and no judgment of society to restrain his instincts, and when, in certain measure, these instincts are his only weapon of defense. I believe this to be true. In prisons and camps every trait of a man is emphasized until it appears as though through the distortion of a magnifying glass. You are free of your accustomed background, freed even of the demands hypocrisy makes on your conduct. Cut off from your environment you

are, as it were, on a desert island and you are yourself. The cowardly become cowards, the courageous become heroes and the weak in spirit break.

Several people collapsed. One old friend of mine, a journalist, lapsed into a sort of quiet madness which took the form of an acute feeling of guilt, although like the rest of us, he had been arrested without any legal charge whatsoever against him. He considered himself so guilty that he thought he ought to be shot immediately and regarded each day that passed as a special mercy which he had been granted. For hours on end he would sit motionless, waiting for imaginary hangmen to come and take him to the gallows. He was eventually removed to an asylum.

Others became frantically religious. A dozen men just let themselves go completely and refused even to wash until we made them do so by force. A great number began to grow beards, but the Police Chief made shaving twice a week obligatory and you risked three days' jail and no food if you failed to comply.

One man—and in the course of four months we discovered only one—acted as informer for the Police Chief. He was a suspicious type. He had learned English God knows where, and for a few months had worked as assistant to one of the American correspondents in Sofia. He would never listen to anyone and he always knew everything—even when and how the war would end! He was only friendly to the prisoners who received food parcels. He was surly and cunning and in every way a really repulsive creature. After his release he became a more or less open German agent and served as informer to the Sofia police. His name was Christo Yanev and perhaps by now he is in hell, for I knew some members of the underground movement who were determined to finish him off.

Even in the camp he was badly beaten up one night and all of us in the dormitory participated. He was trapped according to an old system which, I am told, is used in prisons throughout the world against informers—a blanket is thrown over the man's head and all the prisoners in the room take part in the beating so as to avert responsibility from any individual.

It was in connection with our actual work that we scored our funniest victory over the Police Chief. We worked for nine hours each day—from seven-thirty to twelve and from one-thirty to six—on a mountain road near the camp. Because of the intense cold it was unpleasant not only for us but also for the unfortunate policemen who, bayonets in hand, had to stand guard over us. The road itself was to be carved out of the rock and we had only ordinary spades and shovels with which to do the job. We decided to complain and selected a delegation to go to remonstrate with the Chief. The delegation pointed out that the International Geneva Labor Convention had limited the working day to eight hours and that therefore it was not legal for us to work more than eight hours. To our great surprise the Chief agreed; he even told us that years ago when he was still an ordinary policeman he had fined someone for forcing his workers to work more than eight hours. Thus, thanks to the law, we were spared an extra hour's work. Wretched law! It also says that no person may be imprisoned without a trial, and many other things as well, but the only way we ever benefited from it was in regard to working hours.

The Chief was by no means the real boss of the camp. A German major lurked behind the scenes and came every day to the camp on a so-called visit. As Bulgaria was

technically an independent state and only Germany's ally, it was impossible for a German to be officially placed at the head of a concentration camp, so the Major was merely a "visitor" and the Chief's personal friend. Once we complained to the Chief about his "visits," and received the reply that the German major had nothing whatsoever to do with the camp, but that as he went every day to inspect the German antiaircraft batteries near by, he would come to the Chief's room for a rest and a chat after his work was done.

With the exception of the military zones surrounding German army stores, barracks and munitions dumps, the German system of control was similar to this throughout the country. No German, for example, held any official position in the Sofia police. They were just "friendly advisers." Drexler himself was "chairman of the German Nazi Party" in Sofia and no more, although everyone knew that it was really he who ran the police. In every town, especially in the more important centers, there were German governors and German commanders with their swarms of liaison officers, and thus their control over the Bulgarian administration remained indirect and unofficial.

The Major—I never knew his name—often came accompanied by noncoms and soldiers. While he was conferring with the Chief, the soldiers strolled around the camp and talked to us. This was supposedly forbidden, but nobody cared and our policemen used to join in the conversation. Those of the prisoners who knew German acted as interpreters. Our conversations were frequently very interesting. Most of the soldiers who were stationed down in the town came from the Sudeten territories of Czechoslovakia. I was very curious to know the attitude of these men who had been directly governed by the Nazis

only for the past two years. George Valkov, who knew some Czech and was a great admirer of the Czechoslovak nation, spoke to them so frankly that I trembled to think what the result might be.

"I hate you," he would say to them. "I hate you with all my soul. You had the luck of belonging to one of the best organized countries in Europe, damn you! You were rich and prosperous. But you had to get hold of that gangster, Henlein. And what's the result? You are here today and tomorrow you will die somewhere in the Balkans, maybe in some village you've never even heard of. Or, if you survive the Balkans, you'll die in Russia. For that's where your crazy Fuehrer's going to send you to be slaughtered."

The Sudetens' reaction was interesting. They were not members of the Nazi Party. They were simply soldiers. They believed in all sincerity that Germany would win the war, and that after she had won it they would have the rich Czech land for themselves. The Czechs would be sent elsewhere. These arguments made George and me white with anger. Their reasoning was always the same. These men were not one-hundred-percent Nazis. They may not have been Nazis at all. But they were one-hundred-percent Germans and, as such, wanted world domination for Germany. Nazism was for them the means, not the end. They were Nazi because they felt German.

We had no communications whatsoever with the outside world and, as newspapers were strictly prohibited, the only news we had was that brought by the new prisoners. At the end of March a group of twenty soldiers, three non-coms and two officers arrived and they brought us the welcome tidings of General Simovic's *coup d'état* in Bel-

grade on March 27. This was really good news. We even thought it possible, now that Yugoslavia had joined the Allies, that the Germans might be driven out of Bulgaria. The wildest rumors began to circulate. Some other newcomers told us that the Sofia Government had been overthrown, that King Boris had fled to Germany and that the Military League had proclaimed a republic. I must confess that even I believed this rumor which of course proved to be wishful thinking. But our hopes dwindled in the last days of March when suddenly the number of new prisoners rose to several hundreds. Every room in the three buildings was crowded. The police guard was increased to one hundred and fifty.

The group of soldiers caused the Chief a good deal of annoyance. They were still in uniform and had been arrested while serving with their regiments, by special political police detachments, for "anti-State" ideas. Most of them remembered having spoken in public against the Germans but it had never occurred to them that they would be dragged out of the army by the police. Obviously the police now had new powers and were stronger than the army. The soldiers refused to admit this and they were the first to offer any serious opposition to the Police Chief of the camp. When he threatened them with jail they replied that they would use force if he dared touch them. When he ordered that they should be allowed nothing but bread they got hold of a pail of soup by force and told the Chief to go to hell. They threatened to stop work and they refused point-blank to shave. The Chief was alarmed lest they should encourage the other prisoners to rebel, and he granted them special privileges.

Five miles away from our camp was the Women's Camp,

which contained one of the most miscellaneous gatherings of women one could conceive. There were about thirty young women from all over the country, district leaders of the Women's Workers Union; half a dozen university students who had made anti-German speeches in the Sofia University Lecture rooms; about twenty girls, for the most part completely ignorant of and indifferent to politics, but who happened to be the girl friends of some anti-Government politicians; wives of several former ministers and officers; half a dozen prostitutes whose political ideas for one reason or other had seemed suspect to the police; and about fifteen women from the diplomatic circles of Sofia—mistresses of allied diplomats! The military attaché to a former United Nations legation had four of his girl friends there—not a bad record. The head of a diplomatic mission had two—a woman of about thirty-five and a beautiful blonde creature of eighteen, and both were reported to get on very well together.

Needless to say, we never saw the Women's Camp, but we knew all about the happenings there from the police guards, many of whom were on duty there as well. For these simple policemen, most of them young peasants, the Women's Camp was the excitement of their life. Their eyes popped out of their heads at the sight of so much glamour, make-up and naked legs (when spring came many of the women prisoners wore shorts). But when finally the women decided to sun-bathe, this was too much for the police guards. They sent a written protest to the Commandant of the Women's Camp and henceforth sun-bathing was forbidden.

The majority of the prisoners in our camp were Bulgarians. After them came the Greeks. Most of them came

from the Bulgarian Black Sea towns where their families had been established for centuries. Later, after the conquest of Greece in April 1941, when Bulgarian armies were sent to occupy the territory bordered by the Aegean Sea between the mouths of the Maritsa and Struma rivers, many Greeks there were arrested and sent to the camp. I observed the Greek prisoners with great interest, and with greater interest still their relationship with the Bulgarians. As the result of my four months with them and of my later encounters with Greeks in Bulgaria and in Bulgarian-occupied Greece, I have drawn a rather unusual conclusion about the Greco-Bulgarian question. As all Balkan experts would agree, this is, with the possible exception of the conflict between Rumania and Hungary over Transylvania, the thorniest problem of the Balkan peninsula.

I maintain that this problem would not exist if we were to look on Balkan affairs from the right point of view. The idea that the Balkan peninsula is inhabited by half a dozen different peoples whose one desire is to slit one another's throats the moment an opportunity arises is a wrong one. Although historical events in the last century may point to that, my opinion, which is based on my personal observations, is that these peoples, far from loathing, respect one another, and their primary desire is to live together peacefully.

I will try to explain later how this can be applied to the South Slavs (Serbs, Bulgarians, Croats and Slovenes), but for the moment I will confine myself to the "eternal enmity" between Greeks and Bulgarians.

The Bulgarians first came to the Balkan peninsula in the seventh century A.D. from the shores of the Volga River (hence their name). Together with the other Slav peoples who had settled there earlier they were constantly warring

with the Emperors of Byzantium. But when the Turks conquered the Balkans in the fourteenth century internal peace was assured for over four centuries. Backward though the Sultan's government was, no honest historian can deny that the Turks showed admirable tolerance toward the peoples they had subjugated and allowed them to develop along their own lines within the framework of their own cultural and economic life. The most active and enterprising, the Greeks, prospered greatly and soon became the merchants of the entire Turkish empire. As islanders and sailors, they controlled sea traffic and commerce. Thus they scattered along the whole Eastern Mediterranean seaboard and even today, in many regions, the majority of the coastal population in Turkey, Bulgaria, Rumania and even to some extent in Russia, is of Greek origin. Greek has remained the language of the maritime workers along the Straits and in all the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea ports.

In the nineteenth century the Balkans were liberated, one by one, from Turkish rule. It was the great era of nationalism and it was generally believed that as long as a people had a flag to wave and a strip of territory in which to organize a national state, its future prosperity and happiness was assured. I hope that the twentieth century will prove that this belief is a fallacy. The dismemberment of the economic and geographical unity of the Austrian Empire and its tragic consequences should be a lesson to us. But perhaps the best illustration is that provided by the Soviet Union. There soldiers of different nationalities, united and sustained by common interests and a common ideal, repelled the invader, fighting side by side. Only twenty-five years earlier all the non-Russian subjects of the Czar were being severely persecuted and were hitting

back ferociously at the Russian administration. According to official Soviet statistics, one-third of all Russian casualties in this war have been sustained by the non-Russian soldiers of the Red Army. I can think of no better example of the falsity of the nationalistic conception of the state.

And the Nazi concentration camp at Gonda Voda gave me an object lesson proving it. Here I saw Greeks and Bulgarians working together as friends; I saw Greeks making sacrifices for Bulgarians and Bulgarians making sacrifices for Greeks, not to mention the truly international spirit of co-operation among the other nationalities. We were one in our anti-Fascist convictions and we were facing deadly danger together. When, in late August 1941, the camp was attacked by guerrillas, Russians, Greeks, Bulgarians and Macedonians fought with equal bravery against the German-controlled Bulgarian police force, and Russians, Greeks, Bulgarians and Macedonians died together in this common fight.

But what is it that is supposed to make every Greek hate all Bulgarians and every Bulgarian loathe all Greeks? It is a piece of land two hundred miles long and on an average fifty miles wide that stretches along the northern shore of the Aegean Sea between the Maritsa to the east and the Struma to the west. The northern boundary of this territory is the Rodopi mountains. Until 1912 it belonged to Turkey. After 1913 its eastern half between the rivers Maritsa and Mesta belonged to Bulgaria and its western part between the Mesta and the Struma belonged to Greece. In 1919 Bulgaria lost her share, which the Allies gave to Greece.

There can be no doubt that now the majority of the population of this territory is Greek. I have visited it

myself and I can bear witness to that. It is also true that before 1913 the majority of the population was not Greek. Nor was it Bulgarian. It was Turkish. Even then, however, the Greeks were the most numerous in the ports, whereas the Turks lived mainly in the towns and the Bulgarians were scattered in the villages and the mountains.

This piece of land has been, officially and unofficially, the first on the list in King Boris' revisionist program, and the territory shouted about most loudly by the so-called patriotic societies throughout Bulgaria. The reasons for this are not so much historical or ethnographical as economic and geographical. This Aegean land is Bulgaria's only outlet to the open sea and is the natural port for southern Bulgaria, all of whose roads lead toward the Aegean. These reasons are sound enough. It seems absurd indeed not only from an economic, but from a common-sense point of view, that one of the richest regions of the Balkans, the Thracian fields which are southern Bulgaria, should be denied a natural outlet to the sea. But does that mean that this Aegean territory should be incorporated in the Bulgarian state?

For my part I do not think so. My reasons are the common-sense reasons of any observer who regards the Balkan peninsula as an economic and geographical unit and not as a chessboard on which the unfortunate pawns are shifted to and fro every ten or twenty years. The enmity among the various Balkan states is often artificially instigated by outsiders and by raucous propaganda, and their quarrels are especially harmful to the populations of the disputed territories, "liberated" over and over again by different "liberators"!

The Greeks are the sailors of the Balkans. For centuries they have inhabited the eastern shores of the Balkans. To

maintain that they should be expelled from their homes and that their place should be taken by inland Balkan populations is as nonsensical as it would be to suggest that the Bulgarians or the Serbs should be removed from their fields and mountains in order to install Greeks there. For generations the Greeks have been sea-minded whereas the South Slavs (with the exception of the Dalmatians, who are born sailors too) and the Rumanians have been the peasants, the shepherds and the small-town craftsmen of the Balkans. Nature decided it for them. You can't make the Bulgarians into a sailor nation simply because Bulgarian interests demand sea trade, any more than you can transform the Greeks into farmers, because the interests of Greece demand that she should become independent of her neighbors agriculturally. Any such experiments are doomed to failure. In the interests of both, both must co-operate. The sailors must remain sailors because it is their job, and the peasants must continue to till the land because it is theirs. Their two ways of life are not contradictory, but complementary. The Greek ports in the north Aegean have little or no prospect of true prosperity if their hinterland, southern Bulgaria, remains barred to them. And the commerce of southern Bulgaria suffers enormous losses each year and will continue to do so if it is permanently deprived of its natural outlet to the Aegean. Those who suffer primarily from this insane situation are the populations of both regions. They will suffer until the day when common sense, which demands the abolition of this artificial frontier, is victorious.

The pessimist may deny that it is possible for the Balkan peoples ever to live peacefully together. He clings to visions of professional cutthroats and Ruritanian conspiracies. I maintain that the peoples themselves can and will

achieve this if they are given a chance, the peoples, not those shortsighted rulers whose policy is their own personal popularity, and who use nationalism as a poster with which to recruit support for themselves, as a slogan with which they can fire shallow imaginations. If the peoples are not given their chance they will take it and there will be bloodshed. If we face Balkan problems—and indeed all the problems of Continental Europe—with the same complacent prewar attitude, we shall have to face a terrible tide of revolution which will sweep away all the artificial barriers like so many Chinese Walls throughout the Continent, which hinder more than anything else European understanding and co-operation.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Balkan Unity*

THE idea of Balkan unity is not a new one. It was first conceived during the nineteenth century by Balkan revolutionaries—Serbs, Greeks, Rumanians and Bulgarians—who saw clearly that the unity which had existed under the Sultan's rule must be maintained if the economical and political equilibrium of the peninsula were to be preserved. Unfortunately the Balkan peoples did not all achieve liberation at the same time. It was achieved gradually, district by district, and thus the unity of the Balkans was jeopardized.

The tragedy of the Balkans is that its territory—strategically one of the most important in Europe—was always used by the great powers as a chessboard on which to practice their diverting pastime of power politics. And the Balkan nations themselves never united their efforts to fight external dangers, but on outside instigation exhausted their strength in fighting among themselves. In fact these internal wars were a dress rehearsal of the quarrels between the great powers.

My ambition is not to add another volume to the shelves already laden with books that vie with one another in their attempts to solve—politically, economically or historically—the Balkan problem. I would only like to stress that the idea of Balkan unity and Balkan federation has become once more an idea which is of importance not only to the

Balkans, but to Europe and consequently to the whole world. This war has surely taught us that "peace is indivisible" and that it is a collective and a world-wide concern. Once the shadow of war or of the threat of war falls in the remotest corner of the globe, neither neutrality acts nor isolationism nor surrender in the guise of "appeasement" can prevent the darkness spreading.

The most serious attempt made recently by the Balkan states toward Balkan unity was the alliance of 1912 between Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece. This alliance amazed the world with its achievements. No one in the West had believed that these small and insignificant nations could wage war on a great power, Turkey. But when the Bulgarian armies in the space of three weeks fought their way through Thrace and reached the gates of Constantinople, and when the Serbs and Greeks crushed Turkish resistance in Macedonia, the world had to acknowledge the strength of the Balkan alliance. And it was acknowledged through the Treaty of London in 1913.

Unfortunately, this triumph of Balkan unity was short-lived. The fault was mainly Austria's. For decades the Ballplatz had endeavored to thwart the strivings for inter-Balkan understanding. In 1913 Austrian and German diplomacy united their efforts and succeeded in persuading Ferdinand of Bulgaria to declare war on Serbia and Greece. It was a repetition of 1885, when Austria threw King Milan of Serbia against Bulgaria and started the Serbo-Bulgarian war. In 1885 the Serbian people were bitterly opposed to the policy of their King, who was nothing but an Austrian agent. It was against his people's will that, in a sudden and treacherous attack, he flung the Serbian armies against Bulgaria. They were thrown back

and defeated. In 1913 Ferdinand of Bulgaria attacked more treacherously still. He, in turn, was thrown back and defeated. The Bulgarian people were no more responsible for his shameful policy than were the Serbs in 1885 for Milan's. Extraneous forces that were anti-Serb in 1885 and anti-Bulgarian in 1913 provoked bloodshed between the two peoples. In his book, *The Soul of Yugoslavia*, H. D. Harrison, one of the best-informed men in England on Yugoslav affairs, rightly observes that "the Serbian peasants have a deep regard for the Bulgarian peasants, whom they consider brothers." The Bulgarians have the same feeling toward the Serbs. And yet both Serbs and Bulgarians—not to mention the Greeks and Rumanians—have had to suffer from their governments' policy of mutual distrust. The greatest share of blame, however, goes to the Sofia Government—Ferdinand's government and Boris' government \*—to whose policy most of the failures and opportunities missed in the cause of Balkan co-operation can be traced.

Yet, after the last war, the voice that was loudest in preaching that cause came from the country whose rulers were most responsible for Balkan disunity. It came from Alexander Stamboliyski, Bulgarian Premier from 1919 to 1923. No study of Balkan history between the two world wars, however brief, would be complete without a sketch of this Bulgarian peasant leader. Had he lived ten years longer the fate of the peninsula might have been, as all competent students of Balkan affairs agree, very different.

Stamboliyski firmly believed that the Balkan nations should form a great union to work in wholehearted co-

\* Ferdinand, King of Bulgaria (1887-1918).

Boris, King of Bulgaria (1918- ).

operation for peace and international understanding. When, in 1919, as Prime Minister and representative of Bulgaria at the Peace Conference he signed the Treaty of Neuilly, he sent personal letters to the premiers of Rumania, Yugoslavia and Greece, offering his friendship, suggesting that the old feuds be forgotten and pledging his country to work loyally with them in sincere collaboration. But he was no dreamer, and he knew well that his ideal could not be achieved overnight. The first step, in his opinion, was the union of all the South Slavs. As early as 1910 he coined the word "Yugoslav" (which means South Slav) as a term symbolizing the union of all southern Slav peoples. "By blood and by origin," he said, "we all—Bulgarians, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—are the same. We speak the same language. We have almost the same problems, internal and external, and our interests are identical."

His energy, and above all his unquestionable sincerity, soon brought him success. In March 1923, Yugoslav and Bulgarian representatives signed an agreement at Nish, whereby the groundwork of complete future collaboration was laid. The future seemed definitely brighter and Stamboliyski told a friend: "I need only a few more years to break down all the existing barriers between the Serbs and ourselves. Believe me, in due course there will be no frontiers between the two states. . . ."

He needed only a few more years, and the great edifice of southern Slav brotherhood would have been built. But the work needed him too. And in 1923 he was no more.

With Stamboliyski's death the clock of Balkan friendship was put back several years. In Bulgaria, King Boris' successive governments abandoned Stamboliyski's constructive foreign policy. This had unfavorable reper-

cussions in Yugoslavia, and when Belgrade and Sofia are linked together only by suspicion no diplomatic effort for the pacification of the Balkans can succeed, for the South Slavs form the majority of the Balkan population and the territories they occupy are strategically the most important. The Belgrade-Sofia axis is a genuine axis along which the destiny of the Balkans revolves.

It was because of this distrust between Belgrade and Sofia that the second serious attempt at the formation of a Balkan union failed—namely the Balkan Pact signed in Athens in 1934 by Yugoslavia, Greece, Rumania and Turkey. Without Bulgaria's participation this Balkan pact was a geographical absurdity; the most Balkan of the Balkan countries was omitted from it. It was equally a political absurdity, for thereby these Balkan states mutually guaranteed their Balkan frontiers, which merely meant that they guaranteed their inner frontiers, i.e., their frontiers with Bulgaria. Thus the Athens-Balkan pact was, par excellence, an anti-Bulgarian pact. Yugoslavia, Rumania, Greece and Turkey were taking precautions against a danger which did not exist, for it was obvious that Bulgaria by herself could never be a danger to Balkan peace. The politicians who signed that pact forgot the most important aspect of Balkan politics—that the danger signal is always sounded outside the peninsula, never within.

This in no way excuses King Boris' Government for its antagonistic attitude toward the idea of a Balkan pact. For if, as it was argued in Sofia, the object of this pact was the "encirclement" of Bulgaria, one may ask what steps had Bulgaria taken in her foreign policy since 1923 to prevent encirclement? Those who are "encircled" are those who have provoked encirclement, however loudly

they may yap in protest (see Nazi Germany on the subject!).

Another reason why all efforts for Balkan unity in the last five decades have failed is because attempts were made to solve Balkan problems in a manner which complicated and magnified the difficulties, thereby inviting the usually disastrous commitments to foreign—non-Balkan—intervention. The Balkan problems were regarded as separate problems involving one or another Balkan nation, whereas they can only be solved in an all-Balkan way. Neither the Greek nor the Bulgarian way can ever solve the Greco-Bulgarian difficulties. Both will always fail. Nor will either the Serb or the Croat way solve the problems of Yugoslavia. The approach to these various problems should be a Balkan approach. They must be solved on the general lines of Balkan interests. I could sit down now and write a whole book on the Macedonian question, for instance, and prove with the aid of statistics and of historical and geographical arguments that Macedonia belongs to Bulgaria. With equal ease and to a great extent with the use of the very same arguments I could produce another book of the same size proving that Macedonia belongs to Serbia. But the point is that the conclusions drawn in both books would be right and wrong, and in the same way. This does not mean that, in order to reach a compromise Macedonia should be divided in two, to the partial satisfaction of both Bulgarian and Serbian claims. Macedonia should not be regarded as a territory which can belong alternately to either one of two Balkan states, but as a Balkan territory belonging to all the peoples who inhabit it—Greeks, Albanians, Rumanians (the so-called Cutzo-Vlachs) and Turks, as well as Serbs and Bulgarians.

There are no clear geographical boundaries between any of the Balkan states. Only the Balkan peninsula in its entirety represents a well-defined geographical unity. Ethnographically the position is even more ticklish. No expert, however skilled and learned, can trace a "national" frontier between Yugoslavia and Rumania, between Rumania and Bulgaria, between Bulgaria and Greece and so on. Even the Danube, which constitutes a good natural frontier between Rumania and Bulgaria, does not separate the Rumanians from the Bulgarians; there are over one hundred thousand Rumanians on the Bulgarian side of it and one hundred thousand Bulgarians on the Rumanian side. There are Rumanians in Macedonia, Rumanians in the Serbian Banat, compact masses of Albanians at the mouth of the Danube and Greeks scattered along the entire seaboard of the peninsula. Mussolini has incorporated part of northwestern Greece in his Albanian protectorate on the grounds that the population there consists mainly of Albanians. Some Greeks, on the other hand, claim the whole of southern Albania as Greek territory. Which is right? Both and neither. There are districts in Greece where the majority of the population is Albanian and districts in Albania where the majority is Greek. The same is true of all the much-disputed Balkan territories.

No Balkan problem can be solved by pandering to the old nationalistic feuds. Any attempt to do so will fail since, strange as it may seem, the foundations of a genuine Balkan union have been laid, during these years of Nazi tyranny, by the Balkan peoples themselves. This has been achieved by the forces of the Left or, to be more precise, by the forces which in Britain and America are wrongly labeled "Communist." In parts of the Balkans I saw these

forces at work. I am not going to argue as to whether the political convictions and motives underlying their activities are right or wrong. Their primary aim, of course, is to oust the Nazi invader. But that is not all. More significant for the future is the fact that their attitude toward all Balkan problems is the right one. They regard the political and economical unity of the Balkans as indivisible and their goal is the foundation of a Balkan union. That was the conclusions I drew from my observations at the time and since then events have justified it.

Yugoslavia in particular is now tormented not only by German brutality but also by a severe civil war. The forces of the Left, the Partizans as the British and American press calls them, are gaining ground and, in my opinion, unless they are crushed by a mighty foreign force they will provide the future rulers of Yugoslavia. They already have Russia's backing. In Bulgaria the "Communists" are the only elements who are presenting any effective or organized resistance to the Germans and to their assistant quislings. The situation is similar in northern Greece, and doubtless in the rest of Greece the same trend prevails. In Macedonia too the Federalists—Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek—are in the majority. And with the enormous and ever-increasing Rumanian casualties on the Russian front, it is probable that the same tendency will develop in Rumania.

Whether we like it or not, this is the general trend of political events in the Balkans.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Boris the Last*

THE police chief in the camp fancied himself as an orator. Once a week after the six-thirty roll call he and the German major strutted into the yard and there he delivered his speech. It was, with minor variations, the usual nonsense about the dawn of the New Order and the peace and prosperity which were to be the lot of all Europeans after final victory. On Hitler's birthday a young Bulgarian Nazi who had come specially to the camp for the occasion regaled us with an eloquent biographical sketch of the New Messiah. On May 1 we celebrated Nazi Labor Day and this was the most infuriating of all; for most of the prisoners this had been a real holiday and a real celebration—International Labor Day.

The Chief devoted several speeches to King Boris and his policy. These speeches were not so bad as I would have expected, for they were not couched in the usual patriotic jargon with its liberal sprinkling of superlatives worn thin with misuse. Rather, they etched a portrait of Boris as that of a central Balkan political figure—"the granite foundation stone of the Balkan New Order," as the Chief said.

For once he was right. For what that glory is worth, Boris is undoubtedly the granite foundation stone of the

New Order in the Balkans. He is also one of the most interesting political figures in Europe's recent history.

He calls himself Boris the Third, King of the Bulgarians. The Bulgarian people call him Boris the German. The Sofia politicians call him Boris the Last. According to the Bulgarian constitution he is King by "the grace of God and the will of the people." I am not competent to judge where the grace of God comes in, but the will of the people was certainly not taken into account when he was proclaimed King in the autumn of 1918, after "Foxy" Ferdinand, his father, had fled the country. In fact the will of the people had proclaimed a republic with Alexander Stamboliyski as president.\*

For twenty-five years Boris had been a successful king, that is, successful insofar as his primary objective—that of keeping his job—was concerned. He stuck to his throne while all around him monarchs were being either sent into or brought back from exile, or even murdered. The latter menace—assassination—Boris fought with a good deal of courage (he still circulates without a personal bodyguard) and with the aid of the same weapon. He still stands there, unmurdered, having himself accounted, directly or indirectly, for the death of several thousands of people.

During his twenty-five years of reign Boris has had eleven Prime Ministers—one Conservative, one Left Wing Agrarian, one Fascist, three Democrats, one Republican, one general, one aged and intriguing courtier, one able professional diplomat and one professor of archaeology. Two of these men died natural deaths, one was brutally murdered and one died at a public meeting while he was in the very act of denouncing the King's dictatorial policy. The rest are still living; one is a German agent, one is in

\* See Chapter Six.

prison for anti-German activities, one is the leader of the Sobranye opposition, two are sunk in the oblivion their insignificance warranted, one is Bulgarian minister to Switzerland and the remaining one is the present Prime Minister. With the exception of the last two, who are still in the King's service, all these have been in prison more than once and out of all the eleven only two, as leaders of the National Assembly majority after more or less free elections, represented the people's choice.

In 1940 a Sofia politician described Boris' regime as "an authoritative regime without authority." It was true enough. The Government at that time possessed no other authority than the authority of the police. But that authority was sufficient to enable the Government to carry out its policy, its policy being to remain in office. For this it needed Palace support and this was always forthcoming if the Government remained a docile tool. The Palace's authority was based on the support of the army, that is to say the generals, who were with the King. But to get them there Boris had to wage a long fight which lasted eighteen years.

After the last war most of the army officers were members of what is known as the Military League. The leader, Colonel Damian Velchev, was sentenced to death in 1935, but thanks to the intervention of a group of British M.P.'s and to the protests of democratic circles all over the world his sentence was commuted to lifelong imprisonment. He was released in 1940. His right-hand man, General Christo Zaimov, one of the ablest and most popular officers in the Bulgarian army, was executed in June 1942 on a charge of high treason cooked up by King Boris' cabinet.

Velchev, as a true democrat, for more than ten years

opposed Boris' policy, internal and external. Then he organized the military *coup d'état* of May 19, 1934. Out of modesty he refused to become a member of the new cabinet and his assistant Kimon Georgiev became Prime Minister. He proved one of the best Prime Ministers Bulgaria has ever had. He was pro-Yugoslav, pro-Russian and pro-British. He wanted to sign a military alliance with Yugoslavia to provide a basis for a Balkan coalition which alone might have withstood Germany's *Drang nach Osten*.

Inside the country he introduced sweeping educational, financial and administrative reforms. However, while he was preparing for a general election—and there is no doubt that he would have won it—Boris, thanks to a careful scaffolding of intrigues among the generals, managed to overthrow the Government in the *coup d'état* of January 1935. In the autumn of that year the King arrested Velchev and about five hundred other officers. In 1936 the Military League was disbanded and proclaimed illegal. In 1938 the Chief of Staff, General Yordan Peev, who hated the Germans and supported the Military League, was shot dead at the gates of the War Ministry. Since then the army has obeyed the Palace and no officer has dared question Boris' authority.

Boris' foreign policy is still an enigma to many observers. Was he genuinely pro-German, they ask, or was he pro-British at heart? Does he believe in a German victory? Will he leave Hitler in the lurch at the eleventh hour?

When the time comes Boris will certainly try to disentangle his fortunes from Hitler's, and he may not believe in a German victory. But not because he is—at heart or any other way—pro-British. Neither has he ever been pro-German in any sense but tactically. And when his

hopes of retaining his throne depend on it, he will again pose as pro-British. He has always been and only been pro-Boris.

When Germany attacked Poland the Balkans were completely disunited. Rumania had a military pact with Poland and it is to the credit of her Prime Minister Armand Calinescu, later assassinated by the Iron Guard with German connivance, that he wanted Rumania to side immediately with Poland against Germany. Carol, however, preferred neutrality. Turkey had a pact of military alliance with Britain. Yugoslavia, Rumania, Greece and Turkey still belonged to the Balkan Pact. Bulgaria was neutral.

The Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiosseivanov realized that if they were to be saved the Balkan countries must present a united front of friendly nations. He agreed to join the Balkan Pact and asked Ankara and Belgrade to intervene on Bulgaria's behalf.

The Rumanian Foreign Minister, Gafencu, showed willingness to co-operate with Bulgaria and was ready to cede to her the unimportant territory of Dobrudja, taken by Rumania in 1919. Carol thought otherwise, but nevertheless semiofficial negotiations did take place between Sofia and Bucharest and by the end of 1939 it looked as though a compromise might be reached. At the last Balkan Pact conference in Belgrade in February 1940, it was agreed that reasonable conditions should be made for Bulgaria's entry into the pact. The Turkish Foreign Minister (now Prime Minister) Sarajoglu proposed to Boris and to Kiosseivanov to act as mediator. After these talks Kiosseivanov, much encouraged, confided to me that the goal of Balkan unity was at last within reach. He was in great spirits, and on February 14, 1940, explained to Boris

all his plans for Balkan co-operation. That day his unpopular Minister of the Interior had been dropped from the cabinet, and next morning Kiosseivanov handed to the King the *pro-forma* resignation of the cabinet. At the same time he submitted to him a new list of ministers, but to his intense surprise Boris informed him that he accepted his resignation and would in future dispense with his services.

Thus Kiosseivanov's plans of Balkan co-operation were in vain. After being Prime Minister for more than four years and Foreign Minister for five—quite an achievement in Balkan politics—he had to go. By Palace standards his foreign policy was too dangerous.

Not that it matters who was or is at the head of the Ministry; Boris is the real boss. Nor does the Sofia Parliament matter. It is never consulted and its only function is that of acknowledging the *fait accompli*. Boris alone plays an important role in Bulgarian politics. The stories that his wife Giovanna, daughter of the King of Italy, or his sister Eudoxie have any influence over him, politically, are pure invention. Eudoxie is an ugly old maid who is interested only in her charities. Queen Giovanna spends most of her time in Italy with her two children, eleven-year-old Marie Louise and six-year-old Simeon, the heir to the throne who, according to the Sofia newspapers, is being educated "in the true democratic tradition of his father"!

It is very possible that if another display of Darlanism is indulged in in the Balkans this little boy may succeed to the Bulgarian throne. Boris might well follow his father's example: abdicate in favor of his son and retire to some German castle. (In the 1915 Bulgarian-German treaty of

alliance "Foxy" Ferdinand prudently inserted a clause insuring that "in case the war is lost" he would receive for the rest of his life an adequate pension from the German state. He is still drawing it today. Doubtless Boris has not neglected to make the same arrangement.)

When will Boris endeavor to get in touch with the Allies?

There are already signs that he is laying his plans for eventually doing so. He has sent his most trusted diplomat, who is incidentally also his half brother, Colonel Parvan Draganov, former Minister to Berlin and illegitimate son of King Ferdinand, as Minister to Spain. He has built up a huge legation in Portugal and his former Prime Minister Kiosseivanov is in Switzerland.

But Boris' best friend and collaborator is not a Bulgarian diplomat. He is the German Ambassador to Turkey, Herr von Papen. Like Boris, Papen is not one-hundred-percent pro-Hitler; he is merely pro-Papen. Like Boris, Papen does not believe that Germany can achieve total victory. Like Boris, perhaps even hand in hand with Boris, Papen is making his plans accordingly. . . .

Until December 1941 they reasoned as follows: Soon the Red Army will be defeated. Germany's tremendous forces will be free to face Britain. Through Papen, relations with the United Nations will be established. A compromise peace will be signed. Russia will be the only defeated nation and London and Washington will not be sorry that this is so. Germany will surrender Western Europe and Scandinavia and will confine her *Lebensraum* to Eastern Europe. . . .

The Red Army has since shattered these hopes. But Boris believes that now his position is even stronger. With

the Red Army advancing toward the Balkans he will lose no time in getting in touch with London and Washington. And this is how he will present his case: He is the only quisling in Europe who has not sent a single soldier to the Eastern front. He has occupied no territories that do not belong, according to his propaganda, historically, ethnographically, etc., to Bulgaria. True, he has sent troops to Serbia, but that was only to help Neditch crush the Partizans. And what are the Partizans if not Communists backed by Russia? The atrocities committed by Bulgarian troops in northern Greece? After all, there have been atrocities everywhere and these are certainly not the worst. He has never officially uttered a single word against Britain or America. If the Western powers do not want to see Communism triumphant in the Balkans they must help Boris now, Boris who still has a strong, intact army. . . .

In the case of an allied and non-Russian invasion of the Balkans a deal with Boris might succeed in the same way that it succeeded with Darlan. Of course, one cannot bank on there being an assassin handy every time. But a deal with Boris would be a measure of very temporary expediency. It could lead only to a terrible and bloody civil war, and it would not long be just a civil war. That goes for all Europe's other quislings too. You can oppress some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can not oppress all of the people all of the time.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Oil for Hitler's Tanks*

IT WAS a cold and windy March day and we were coming back from our work on the road to lunch when we saw that an unusually big convoy of prisoners had arrived. Twenty-five policemen on horseback were guarding the Police Building, and there was a large pile of suitcases and blankets in front of the entrance. The newcomers were inside being cross-examined. They began to come out just as we were gulping down the last drops of our meager ration of soup. Eager for news of the outside world, we clustered round them.

There were seventeen of them and all seemed tough and wiry with the exception of one tall, thin old man who looked like God the Father with his wool-white hair and his long snowy beard. The rest were middle-aged men whose faces bore traces of the unpleasant experiences they had undergone. The years each one had spent in prison, added together, came to the staggering total of two hundred and seven. They were the proud possessors of nineteen death sentences (one man had been condemned to death three times but so far had eluded the executioner!). They all had false teeth—their real teeth had been knocked out years ago in various encounters with the police—and there was not one who had not had more than one limb broken in similar circumstances. One had the distinction of having been in every prison in Europe, including a

British prison (for having entered the British Isles without a visa). Another had fought in the Spanish Civil War as a colonel in the Republican army and then had been interned in a French concentration camp. He had eventually escaped to Russia via Swiss, Italian, Yugoslav, Hungarian and Rumanian prisons. One had fought with the Chinese against the Japanese. One had spent five years in a Brazilian prison. Others had been in the United States and in Australia. All of them spoke perfect Russian and most of them knew French and German. Four spoke good English and knew the history of the British trade-union movement in its every detail. They were really an impressive group.

Three of the newcomers I knew already, and I was glad to see them again. One was a Sofia lawyer, who had been in prison from 1925 to 1937, and had since defended free of charge any political prisoner who could not afford to pay for a lawyer. The second was a tailor, a man of about thirty-five, who at the age of seventeen had been sentenced to eleven years of hard labor, and the third was Naum Petrov, an old friend of mine, who worked in a printing office and was one of the leaders of the Bulgarian Leftist Youth movement.

These men were the principal leaders of the Bulgarian Workers' Union. The Bulgarian Government calls it the Communist Party, but that is not a very exact definition. They certainly had and still have contacts with the Third International through its Secretary General, George Dimitrov of Reichstag trial fame, himself a Bulgarian and one of the founders of the Bulgarian Workers' Party. They are certainly pro-Russian and pro-Soviet in the extreme. Yet one cannot describe them as orthodox Communists. Some of them have Communist ideas and preach the

principles of Communism, but many of the leaders in the provinces have never read a Communist book and would be unable to define the true meaning of Communism. The nearest analogy I can think of would be a union comprising the British Labor Party, the trade-unions, the Independent Labor Party, the Communists and the various other independent Left Wing elements.

The Workers' Union certainly commands the unanimous confidence of all Bulgarian workers and if given a chance, that is, if a really free election were held, it would be easily victorious in all the towns, including the capital. Its strength in the villages is difficult to estimate. Since 1934 no elections have taken place in the Bulgarian villages and, even before that, the elections were far from free, in the democratic sense of the word. However there is no doubt that the influence of the Workers' Union is growing throughout the country.

From the very beginning everyone in the camp, prisoners and policemen alike, were very favorably impressed by the Workers. They showed a wonderful spirit of comradeship and teamwork and they were perfectly organized, which is perhaps not surprising after all the practice they had had! They took charge of the camp's sanitary conditions and formed an efficient system of medical supervision. More valuable still, they were the first to arrange what in prison slang is known as "a channel"—that is to say, communication with the outer world. Thus they received newspapers, letters and even some books, which they distributed among themselves, but thanks to Naum Petrov I enjoyed many of their privileges. I read almost all their books—repetitive Leftist literature for the most part, but my thirst for printed matter was such that I

would gladly have pored over a telephone directory! I had to promise not to tell anyone. I kept my word and enjoyed the confidence of the Workers' group till the end. George Valkov was the only other "outsider" whom they did not consider suspicious and he too received largesse in the shape of newspaper cuttings, books and information. George's contact with the Workers was not through Naum, but through someone else, and neither of us was supposed to know that the other was in contact with them. Such watertight precautions may seem absurd, but they were justified; it was only thanks to them that the "channel" was maintained more or less open.

During the first days of April four more Workers arrived, young students from the town of Haskovo in southern Bulgaria. They and five other students had been arrested by the Military Police for distributing anti-German leaflets. The other five had succumbed in the Assenovgrad Police Prison after days of relentless agony. All nine had been the victims of what is perhaps the most fiendish torture ever devised. It is said to be an invention of the Italian Fascists and hitherto unknown even to the Sofia police. A big piece of cloth is tied to the end of a stick and set on fire. The prisoner, gagged and bound with ropes, lies on the ground and his body, between the chest and knees, is rubbed with the burning torch. The operation is mainly directed against his sexual organs, which, if he survives it, remain crippled for life. The four students were half dead by the time they reached the camp.

I shall never forget my rage and indignation when I saw the charred bodies of these boys. Their comrades had put them in the Red Hall and were trying to soothe their agony. The policemen hovered round, eager to help, and for once even the Police Chief was moved to pity and gave

permission for bandages and ointments to be bought. Two policemen immediately volunteered to go into the town and fetch them. When they returned late that evening one of them muttered to me: "It makes me wild. My brother's the same age as these youngsters."

These four boys, and many others whom I met later, whose hungriest ambition was to suffer, if need be, for their beliefs, helped me to understand something of the psychology of the Left. *Mystique* would be a more adequate word. Later, when the Germans were advancing in Russia, I remembered their pale anguished faces and I *knew* that the then retreating forces of the Left would never be defeated. I write this, not as a supporter or as a sympathizer, but as an observer who endeavors to be honest and not to put his observations at the disposal of any prejudice.

My association with the Left began at the end of 1939, thanks to a curious incident. In December, the Workers' secret newspaper *Rabotnickesko Delo* (Workers' Action) published a violent article attacking the "war propaganda of the plutocracies." In it all the pro-Ally editors and journalists were accused of being agents in the pay of the British Ministry of Information. I myself was portrayed as a "dangerous newspaperman working to ensure Bulgaria's participation in the war on the side of the imperialistic Western powers." Today in the light of later events this seems unreal, but at that time, unfortunately, the Third International was wasting much precious time and energy in fighting the democratic forces all over the world. I am not in a position to judge the motives underlying the instructions given at the beginning of the war by the Third International Headquarters to its propaganda

organizations throughout the world, but these instructions were to combat the allied war effort. The effect this had later in France will be remembered. I will confine myself to recording the fact that this state of affairs did considerable damage to the allied cause in Bulgaria, where the forces of the Left were split ideologically into two groups: anti-Fascist pro-democratic and anti-Fascist pro-Moscow.

I was personally annoyed by the article because I did not want to be involved in the labyrinth of Sofia party politics and partisan quarrels, which I had always avoided like the plague. As a journalist I was in touch with all the political leaders, but I tried to remain unimplicated in their personal quarrels. Otherwise it would have been impossible for me to present to the papers that I represented a fair picture of events. But it was not an easy task. All the party politicians were very suspicious of one another and it took me months to convince some of them that my interest in their activities was a purely professional one, that my only ambition was to secure information, not to play a part in their various intrigues.

The Workers' leaders were the most suspicious. And rightly so, for no other political movement in Bulgaria has suffered so much from *agents provocateurs*. One such *provocateur* managed to reach the highest peak of the Union's organization. In 1937 he was appointed member of the Committee of Three which controlled the Sofia branch of the Union. In the parliamentary elections of 1939 this man represented the Workers in all their negotiations with the other opposition parties and, as such, signed a political agreement with the Agrarian movement. This was the first step since 1925 toward a *rapprochement* between the two most powerful anti-Fascist parties in the

country. It was an important achievement in the formation of a wider democratic front which later might have played a decisive role. . . . But the police, to whom the original agreement had been handed, arrested the Agrarian leader who had signed it on behalf of his party, as well as their informer's assistants, the leaders of the Workers' movement. This police triumph paralyzed the activities of both the Agrarians and the Workers for many months to come.

Thus it was only natural that the Workers should regard me with suspicion. In their eyes I was the representative of "the most capitalistic paper in the world," and what is more I did not hesitate to describe their activities at that time as harmful to the allied cause. However, thanks to Naum Petrov, I managed eventually to establish relations of perfect confidence with them and, as I shall relate, they were extremely helpful to me during my arrest and my wanderings as an outlaw from village to village, and later when I was planning my escape.

Naum was an exceptionally clever man. As late as 1935 he had been an ordinary worker in the printing press where one of the papers I worked for was produced. We became good friends and I often used to visit him in his little house in what is known as Red Sofia (the workers' quarter). He controlled one of the Party's secret printing machines, of which they had several, and he trusted me enough to ask my advice on the best way to compose illegal leaflets attacking the Government's foreign policy. Singlehanded, with only one small boy to help him, he produced, on an average, two thousand leaflets a month.

I complained to Naum about the article in *Rabotnicheskoe Delo*. He promised to do what he could and in two days' time he introduced me to the editor of the secret

paper. The editor told me later that Naum had vouched for me "with his life." His chief argument in my favor, apparently, was that he had known me at the age of twenty, when I was a poor reporter toiling over twelve hours a day for my living and exploited by my employers in the same way that all other workers are!

I met the editor several times and we became friends. He was a nice fellow and a tough guy if ever there was one. He had had every bone in his body broken during sessions with the police, who nicknamed him "the Dumb Man." He was famous for his courage and his endurance. From the moment he entered the Police Building he really became dumb, and neither threats nor tortures could induce him to utter a word. I met him again in the autumn of 1941. He was then the leader of a small group of workers who slept in the daytime in different hiding places and worked during the night, distributing leaflets and papers in the blackout.

The incident of the article was soon forgotten. I was dropped from the list of "plutocratic agents," and in the course of the next year Naum and the editor supplied me with all my most valuable information about the activities of the different political parties. They were infinitely better informed than anyone else about the activities of the Germans and their assistants in the Bulgarian Government. It was Naum who told me in the first days of December 1940 that more than one hundred German military trucks had entered Bulgaria from Rumania via the Dobrudja, and were making their way hurriedly into the Balkan mountains. Naum's information was correct down to the smallest detail: the Germans were moving in four columns, they were dressed in blue overalls, their vehicles were

camouflaged as civilian lorries and had no number plates. They were buying food in all the towns through which they passed and paying for it, in many cases, with Rumanian and even with French money.

There could be no doubt as to the authenticity of this information. I knew Naum's sources to be invariably accurate. The news was in itself sensational and could have had great international effect. I decided to pass it on to Cedric Salter, the *Daily Mail* correspondent with whom I was working in close collaboration. We both agreed that it was a real scoop but, realizing the international complications to which it might give rise, we decided to ask the advice of the British and American legations. Their own inquiries to King Boris' Government produced an explanation from the War Ministry, which was given to both the British and American military attachés, according to which some German "technicians" had arrived to instruct the Bulgarian army in antiaircraft training. It was, of course, a lie. The Germans had come to organize anti-aircraft nests in the Balkan mountains as outposts against allied air attacks on the Rumanian oil fields.

I sent a dispatch describing the arrival of the "technicians," in consequence of which I was called to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where I was first accused of "spreading lies." When I proved that my information was correct I was ticked off for disclosing military secrets. Finally, after I asked since when the movements of *German* technicians were considered to be *Bulgarian* military secrets, I was left in peace. (Bulgaria was officially neutral and the censor could not complain of a newspaper correspondent sending information about the movements of foreigners, which was what the Germans, in theory, were still supposed to be!)

And here I come to one of the most interesting episodes of the war in the Balkans: the fight for the Rumanian oil fields, the largest in Europe and the most important source of oil for Hitler's mechanized armies. The fight was won by the Germans not on the military, but on the diplomatic front. The Germans held the losing cards but their bluff was never called.

In October 1940 the Germans began pouring into Rumania, but they arrived in great numbers only in November. Mussolini launched his ill-fated campaign against Greece on October 28, and by the end of November he had demonstrated to the world the true worth of his much vaunted Fascist armies. The R.A.F. was then operating from the Greek mainland and their bases were only one hour distant from the Rumanian oil fields. The antiaircraft defense of the oil fields was at that time practically nonexistent; the Germans had only just arrived in Rumania and the Nazi High Command in the Balkans was panic-stricken at the idea of R.A.F. attacks on the oil fields. So great was their need that they even requested that the proportionately tiny number of antiaircraft guns in service in the Bulgarian army be handed over to them. Their "technicians" started to organize antiaircraft batteries, working at top speed through extreme cold and violent snowstorms. It was obvious that the Germans were uneasy, for Italy had upset their timetable and endangered their plans as well as covering herself with ridicule.

It was Ribbentrop who came to the assistance of List, German C-in-C in the Balkans. King Boris was summoned to Berchtesgaden by the end of November. He was given definite instructions in regard to the Rumanian oil fields. He must maintain to the last the idea that he was desperately trying to remain neutral and to oppose the Ger-

mans, and he must even seek support from the Allies for his policy. Boris played his part with consummate skill.

In December 1940 the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs took great pains to explain to the British and American diplomats in Sofia that the King was trying his hardest to keep the Germans out and that they should support him in this. The question of the Rumanian oil fields was raised. The Foreign Minister alleged that if British planes flew over Bulgaria to bomb the Rumanian oil fields, Hitler would cross the Danube and occupy the whole of Bulgaria. Therefore Britain, in the name of Balkan peace and in her own interest (!), should refrain from interfering with German oil supplies in Rumania in order to keep the Germans out of Bulgaria. No efforts were spared to make this great bluff succeed. The Press Minister "confidentially" begged several American journalists to convince the American Minister of the wisdom of this suggestion. The Wilhelmstrasse won; the Bulgarian Government was officially informed that Britain would respect Bulgarian neutrality and would not bomb the Rumanian oil fields. King Boris' Foreign Minister, announcing this decision to the parliamentary Committee for Foreign Affairs, added that the Bulgarian Government greatly appreciated Great Britain's attitude in this matter.

So did the German Government.

What had happened in reality? The Germans, aware of the inadequacy of the antiaircraft defenses in Rumania and terrified of the consequences of the R.A.F. raid, had adroitly maneuvered a diplomatic coup which removed all danger from the oil fields and gave them time to organize their defenses both in Rumania and in the Bulgarian mountains.

But there was more to it than that. The battle for the

Rumanian oil fields was complicated by the situation in Europe. Greece was resisting heroically, but, in spite of the successes of her strategy and the gallantry of her soldiers, the capacities of the Greek war machine—which was after all the war machine of a tiny nation—were strained to the point of almost complete exhaustion. It was therefore essential that, unless—which was impossible—a powerful British army could be landed on the Greek mainland, the inevitable German thrust against Greece should be delayed until the last possible moment. This was the tragic position, for Britain in 1941 was not in a position to meet the onslaught of the German panzers anywhere on the European Continent, least of all in the Balkans and on the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, which could be supplied only by the long sea route via the Cape. All she could do was to fight, militarily and to some extent diplomatically, a delaying action, and in the light of this necessity the British attitude toward the Rumanian oil fields becomes more comprehensible. Certainly the Greeks relied on British diplomacy to keep the Germans out of Bulgaria for as long as possible, and were for this reason opposed to the bombing of the oil fields. They were careful not to provoke the Germans in any way and—although they were at war with Germany's ally—the entire staff of the German Legation stayed on in Athens and the Greek Minister remained in Berlin.

I have many Greek friends who criticize the attitude adopted by their Government and maintain that Greece should have broken off diplomatic relations with Germany directly after Italy invaded Greek territory. They argue that Germany could not have attacked them during the winter, as her troops had only just arrived in Rumania and were meeting there with great transport difficulties. In

fairness to this theory I must add that it would have been extremely difficult for the German armies to pass through Bulgaria until the end of February. Until then the Danube is frozen most of the time and the Bulgarian railway system and roads are impracticable. Only three roads cross the Balkan mountain range from northern into southern Bulgaria, climbing to over six thousand feet and hardly suitable for a mechanized army. When, in March, the Germans did cross the Danube into Bulgaria it took them more than a month to prepare their troops and to organize the onslaught on Yugoslavia and Greece. It can be argued that they could not have done this during the winter months. But did not Norway prove that the German army was able to overcome the obstacles that winter put in its way?

There is obviously a lot to be said on both sides. Personally I believe that if bold action had been taken against the Germans at that time in the shape of a smashing raid against the Rumanian oil fields it would have been more profitable than the overcautious efforts to delay their advance. For I saw how desperately the Germans tried to avoid this and I think they tried so hard only because they knew how disastrous the effects of an R.A.F. raid would have been to them.

Moreover, the political effect in Bulgaria and Rumania would have been far-reaching. I have it from reliable sources that all pro-allied sections of political opinion in Rumania and the larger part of the Rumanian people would have welcomed the bombing of the oil fields and were expecting it. Being very much interested in this matter, I made a special little "Gallup poll" of my own among all the Bulgarian politicians of importance and influence. It proved to me that the leaders of the demo-

cratic and Left Wing parties (who held by far the greatest majorities) would have rejoiced over such a display of British air strength. They pointed out, with truth, that the destruction of the Rumanian oil fields would have been the best propaganda Britain could make in the Balkans.

About fifteen miles from the camp, in the middle of the valley of Assenovgrad, was a large German military airdrome which was reported to be the biggest in the Balkans. Over three hundred planes were scattered along the valley. The din they made was terrific, and their sound brought the war nearer to us on our isolated mountain peak. We hated the bloodcurdling screech of the Stukas as they practice-dived all round the camp. Someone suggested that it was on purpose they came so near—to annoy and to scare us—but we decided he was overestimating our importance, although he quoted examples of concentration camps in Poland being bombed by German planes! I pointed out that it was hardly likely they would want to bomb the policemen in our midst as well, but I cursed the Stukas just the same and rejoiced with bestial glee when one of the machines crashed in flames before our eyes. When we heard from the policemen that both the airmen had been burnt to death it cheered us up for the whole day!

It was at dawn on April 6 that we most cursed the Nazi planes. They woke us at three o'clock. The airfield was bright with searchlights and the air throbbed with the noise of the engines. We gazed out through the windows of our dormitory and our hearts sank. Obviously the hundreds of planes that were taking off at this early hour were not bound for a pleasure trip. The first lot of two-

engined bombers flew slowly into the distance—slowly because their speed was curtailed by a heavy load of bombs. Powerless to do anything but curse, we watched them. They were still taking off when the bell rang at six. When we went out to work the sky was filling up with planes. Some had returned. They swooped down on the airfield, swift and carefree, now that they were relieved of their burden of bombs. We had counted the outgoing planes. Over two hundred and fifty had flown southward—to Greece. And now they were going westward—to the Yugoslav frontier.

Then the earth began to echo the noises of destruction. We were not more than forty miles from the Greek frontier. The roar was continuous. The officers among us explained that the sound of artillery fire came from the south. This meant the Greeks were hitting back and we rejoiced but not for long. In the afternoon the noise died down and by evening silence had returned. We realized what that meant too—the Nazi hordes had made their way into Greece. Hitler's Balkan blitzkrieg had started.

## CHAPTER IX

### *Cripps the Prophet*

THE German Balkan campaign in April 1941 is the best illustration of the axiom that military operations are often won or lost before a shot is fired, and that armies have only to follow in the tracks laid down for them by diplomatic activities and secret weapons. The whirlwind success of the Nazi blitzkrieg in Yugoslavia and Greece was more the outcome of a political victory than a military achievement—a political victory won from the Allies in the ten years that preceded the war.

In October 1940 the Germans entered the Balkan peninsula by peaceful means: by "invitation" of the Rumanian Prime Minister, General Antonescu, as "instructors" to the Rumanian army. This in spite of the fact that Rumania was regarded as an allied stronghold and up till then, together with Yugoslavia, her foreign policy had proved the most loyal to the old Entente principals. In their great bulk the Rumanian people were pro-French, pro-British and anti-German. For Rumania owed her position as the largest, richest and internationally most important Balkan state to the support of Great Britain and France at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Yet the fact remains that German diplomacy turned this Balkan fortress of allied diplomacy into the first Balkan country to join the Nazi New Order.

Next on the map came Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Stra-

tegically Bulgaria was the more important. The Luftwaffe's bases in Bulgarian territory were within half an hour's distance of Istanbul and the Straits, and the influence of this fact over the whole situation in Southeastern Europe and the Middle East became increasingly clear in 1941 and 1942. Situated in the heart of the Balkans, Bulgaria was an ideal base for operations all over the peninsula. The tragic truth of this was proved by the German attack on Yugoslavia. General List stabbed the Yugoslav armies in the back and cut them off from their roads of retreat toward Greece simply because he was able to strike with great concentration of power from his bases in Bulgaria. On the second day of the war his panzers, starting from southeastern Bulgaria, reached the important Yugoslav city of Skoplje, controlling thereby the Vardar valley and the only Yugoslav communications with the Mediterranean. It is true that even without this advantage the great superiority of the German armies in numbers and equipment and their crushing supremacy in the air made the issue of this David-and-Goliath fight a foregone conclusion. But in view of the great military qualities of the Yugoslav troops it is certain that, had they not been cut off in the first days of the war in Macedonia, they would have been able to continue the war much longer by retreating in orderly fashion through the Vardar valley toward Greece, and perhaps preserving the most valuable part of their armies intact.

German diplomacy in this war has proved incomparably better than it was from 1914 to 1918. In fact, I consider that in Eastern Europe they showed themselves better diplomats than soldiers. They won Rumania, Bulgaria and—until General Simovic's *coup d'état*—Yugoslavia, by diplomatic means. By this I do not wish to detract in any

way from Yugoslavia's heroic refusal to surrender. General Simovic's action is undoubtedly one of the most courageous deeds of the war. As Douglas Reed says, referring to it in *All Our Tomorrows*, a "superhuman effort of the flesh and the spirit is needed to offer resistance to an incalculably superior foe, thwarted by no deep channel, but massed upon the open land frontier." But Germany's success with Prince Paul and Premier Tsvetkovic, who together with his Foreign Minister Tsintsar Markovic signed the Tripartite Pact on March 23, 1941, and thereby hitched Yugoslavia's wagon to the Nazi star, is an even more remarkable diplomatic achievement in view of what followed afterward. Nazi diplomacy managed to persuade the Belgrade Government to join the New Order in spite of the great popular opposition within the country. As in Rumania, the German diplomats in Yugoslavia worked under unfavorable conditions.

The German diplomatic success in regard to Bulgaria was even greater. For here the Nazis had Turkey to contend with. Turkey had massed several divisions at the Turko-Bulgarian frontier; Turkey was a military ally of Great Britain, and the Turkish newspapers openly declared that "the frontier of Turkish interests lay on the Danube," which was a clear warning to the German troops on the other side of it. King Boris of Bulgaria was summoned to Berchtesgaden in November 1940. In the long discussions which he had there with Hitler and Ribbentrop, Bulgaria's fate was decided. Boris agreed on principle to sign the Tripartite Pact and to allow German troops to occupy Bulgaria. He managed, however, to obtain Hitler's promise that the following three conditions be observed: first, that there should be no war on Bulgarian territory (that is to say, no attack on the part of Tur-

key); secondly, that Yugoslavia should also join the pact; and thirdly, that Bulgarian troops should not be used in attack against Greece.

Germany observed these three points of the Berchtesgaden Hitler-Boris agreement. By the Turko-Bulgarian pact of nonaggression (February 1941) Turkish neutrality was assured and the possibilities of a Turkish action against Bulgaria were dispelled; Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact three weeks after Bulgaria, and no Bulgarian troops were used in any of the German Balkan campaigns. It is interesting to note that of these three points only the last concerned Bulgaria directly, whereas the first two involved Germany's relations with other states. Thus Hitler did not hesitate to promise Boris that he could count on a certain policy being adopted by other countries, one of which, Turkey, was Great Britain's ally. It shows how sure Hitler was of himself and how well he knew the strength of the positions held by his diplomats in South-eastern Europe.

When at the end of January 1941 it became obvious that the Germans in Rumania were making preparations to cross the Danube into Bulgaria, the greatest interest was focused on Turko-Bulgarian relations, which now meant Turko-German relations. It was assumed that if the Germans arrived in Bulgaria, Turkey would fight. British and American papers wrote freely about it, and it was argued that Hitler might not invade Bulgaria after all, as he would not want to indulge in a costly war expedition across the Straits. I remember very well that in a conversation with one of the Bulgarian Cabinet ministers, early in February, I pointed out that a Turko-Bulgarian war would be most unpopular in the country and would prove disastrous to Bulgaria's young industrial cities and to her ports and

communications, which could be bombed to smithereens from allied bases in Turkey. He smiled as he gave the following significant reply: "That won't happen. Von Papen will see to that."

At that time von Papen directed German diplomatic activities in Southeastern Europe and his increasingly frequent visits to Sofia could not be explained away as *visites de politesse* only. From reliable sources I received information that he had promised King Boris that "Turkey would not react" to a German occupation of Bulgaria. I could not understand on what foundations this promise was based. All the journalist friends in Turkey to whom I had sent inquiries replied that the Turks would fight. Meanwhile the German Legation in Sofia was busy convincing Bulgarian Government circles that von Papen's efforts would soon bear fruit in the shape of a Turko-Bulgarian pact of nonaggression. And in fact this pact was signed at the end of February 1941, and was regarded as a great German diplomatic success. It strengthened King Boris' position and also that of the pro-German rulers in Belgrade, since Turkey, who was according to the Balkan pact Yugoslavia's ally, had made a concession to Germany. Germany's influence was growing stronger and stronger. For the Turko-Bulgarian pact of nonaggression was in everything but name a Turko-German pact of nonaggression. Several months later this purely nominal difference was removed and Turkey signed a treaty of nonaggression with Germany proper. Thus the climax of von Papen's activities was the signing of the treaty of nonaggression and friendship with a country whose military ally, Great Britain, was at war with Germany.

In the light of events that followed it can be argued that this neutralization of Turkey was almost as ad-

vantageous for Britain as it was for Germany. Had Germany struck with all her might across the Straits against Turkey and had Hitler's panzers penetrated into Asia Minor, the British position in the Middle East would have become in all probability very dangerous. A disaster for Turkey, in other words, would have meant a disaster for Britain and for the United Nations as well. Perhaps by signing treaties of friendship with Germany, Turkey really helped Britain and the Allies. I do not know. It is for the diplomats and the politicians to argue about it. I am merely trying, as a reporter, to describe Germany's vigorous diplomatic effort, which in the Balkans paved the way for her tanks.

It would be a mistake to consider these German political and diplomatic successes as wonderful achievements that took place only after the outbreak of war. Nor should one regard the setbacks of British and American diplomacy as failures due to any individual representative of Britain and America in the Balkan capitals. It was not in the power of these diplomats to make up for lost time. Between 1930 and 1940 the Balkans were considered outside Britain's sphere of interest. Neville Chamberlain himself declared in one of his speeches that it was not Britain's intention to deprive Germany of her natural economic outlet in Southeastern Europe. Trade with the Balkan countries was neglected and even discouraged. It was only in April 1940 that the British Government decided to form the U.K.C.C. (United Kingdom Commercial Corporation), a corporation that was entirely dependent on Government subsidies and the chief aim of which was to develop trade with all the Near Eastern countries and with the Balkans in particular. But it was much too late. With

Italy's entry into the war communications were cut. Above all, Germany had already acquired an almost complete strangle hold over every Balkan country by means of the frozen-credits system which the Germans described as a revolution in economics but which was nothing but a large-scale swindle.

When Hitler came to power in 1933 Germany had no foreign currencies and no credit with which to continue her trade with Southeastern Europe in the normal way. She therefore began to apply the Schacht, or barter, system, and in less than five years the monopoly of Balkan trade was hers. At the advent of war she controlled more than fifty percent of all Balkan trade.

Germany began by buying up in all the Balkan countries those products which these countries badly needed to export, but for which they could not find foreign markets on account of the low prices of most of the Balkan goods on the international market. This was the main economic problem of the Balkans: the Balkan peasant—and the population of the Balkans is composed mainly of peasants—could not afford to sell what he produced, since the price he received was not sufficient to cover his expenses or to guarantee him even the minimum conditions of a decent life. For example, international conditions beyond his control had reduced the price of wheat to such a low level that in exchange for a cart of best-quality wheat he would receive the equivalent of two shirts or of one pair of trousers on the town market! This disastrous state of affairs obliged all the Balkan governments to buy the agricultural produce of their peasants at prices often more than twice its actual value. But this system of state subsidy could not continue indefinitely as it brought huge deficits to the state budgets, and from 1930 to 1935, in

common with the rest of the world, all the Balkan states were passing through an acute financial crisis.

Schacht was cunning enough to grasp the situation, and when his representatives in the Balkan capitals offered to buy at higher prices than the international market prices their proposals were gladly accepted. His treaties were all signed on the barter principle but this—as far as the Balkan countries were concerned—was no drawback, for the industrial goods that Germany offered were much needed in the internal Balkan markets. The peasants received adequate prices for their produce, the crippling burden on the state budget was reduced, and the products of German industry, easily sold because of the great demand for industrial goods throughout the Balkans, brought in the money that was needed to meet the requirements of the peasant population.

The system would have worked well enough if Germany had sent to the Balkan countries industrial goods in equivalent number to the agricultural products she was receiving. But Dr. Schacht had other intentions. He knew very well that Germany could not afford to pay for the ever-increasing exports which she demanded from the Balkans, but in spite—or rather because—of that she increased her demands until by 1936 she became heavily in debt to the Balkan countries. Herein lay her advantage, for in this respect Schacht's ideas were contrary to the normal principles of economic life. The Balkan governments, naturally, were worried by their enormous credits. In 1936 these "frozen credits"—i.e., Germany's debts—amounted to 33,000,000 Reichsmark for Greece, 21,000,000 for Yugoslavia, 18,000,000 for Rumania and 13,000,000 for Bulgaria. Schacht, however, was quite at home in his unusual role of happy debtor. And the real blackmail began.

He increased the price of Germany's industrial goods and explained that only thus would he be able to send all that he had promised. This is why Germany signed only short-term trade agreements—usually for six months—with the Balkan countries. With each new agreement she increased her prices and her debt. In 1940, for example, Bulgaria's frozen credits in Berlin reached the staggering total of 11,-000,000,000 leva (roughly £22,000,000)—fifty percent more than Bulgaria's annual budget! This abnormal situation put the Germans into an extremely advantageous position which they exploited with their usual unscrupulous efficiency. When war broke out, the Balkan governments were imploring creditors, with Germany as the naughty debtor who not only could afford not to pay her debts but did everything in her power to increase them.

Germany's economic strangle hold on the Balkans provided her with trump cards for the political struggle as well. With this weapon she exercised powerful pressure on the influential financial and commercial circles in the Balkan capitals, as well as on their governments.

In Bulgaria many mistakes could have been avoided if the British Legation in Sofia had had a more complete picture of the political, economic and social conditions in the country. The same applies to the American Legation, but to neither the Russian nor to the German diplomatic missions. With a very few exceptions British and American diplomats restricted their personal contacts to the so-called "society" people. But society does not exist in Sofia (nor in Belgrade) as it does in London and Paris and New York. The Bulgarians are poor and simple folk and there is no Bulgarian aristocracy in the accepted sense of the word. The so-called society of Sofia, from whose ranks

many of the diplomats chose their friends, consisted for the most part of rich crooks, uncertain businessmen and cosmopolitan elements such as are to be found in every Balkan capital. These were the only people who could afford to entertain, for the average salary of a well-paid Bulgarian official and the average income of a successful Bulgarian merchant do not exceed the equivalent of £20 a month! Yet the poor officials, together with the politicians, writers, poets, professors, journalists and university students, represented society in a wider sense. Through them it was possible to have a clear idea of the real conditions in the country. But they never came near the Legation circles.

The only Englishmen and Americans who got to know these people well were the correspondents of the Anglo-American press, and it is greatly to their credit. Bob St. John, later famous for his book *From the Land of Silent People*, had a large group of Bulgarian friends who would not have been able to afford a meal at one of the first-class restaurants! Thus he acquired accurate information and his dispatches were excellent. So did David Walker (*Daily Mirror*) who also was always well informed. So did Walter Duranty, who at the end of 1940 stayed several months in Sofia and never mingled with "society." Derek Patmore, the *News Chronicle* correspondent, who provided us with the material for many a joke by the extraordinary parties he gave for actors and obscure poets and intellectuals, followed the same policy and his present-day dispatches from Istanbul about Bulgarian affairs are first-class. All these journalists met the right people and had the right information.

In this respect one of the most interesting examples of

the British Legation's attitude occurred during Sir Stafford Cripps' visit to Sofia in June 1940.

On account of the unanimous pro-Russian feeling of the Bulgarian people no British statesman is more popular in Bulgaria than Sir Stafford Cripps, who is regarded as the champion of Anglo-Soviet friendship. I was astonished myself to witness the excitement of public opinion when Sir Stafford was appointed ambassador to Moscow and arrived in Sofia to catch the Russian plane to Moscow. It was several days before Italy ventured on her glorious contribution to France's defeat. Sir Stafford arrived by air from Athens on June 6 and had to wait for his plane for several days. His mission had aroused world-wide interest, and naturally his arrival in Sofia focused the attention of all the foreign correspondents in the Balkans. American journalists flocked from Bucharest and Belgrade to see him.

Sir Stafford Cripps' sojourn in Sofia, ably exploited, could have been a triumph for British prestige. Two or three sentences to the local press would have neutralized the stream of Goebbels' inspiration. The latter's chief argument in Bulgaria at that time was—and still is—that Britain in her heart is Russia's enemy. And here in Sofia was the man who believed in Anglo-Russian co-operation and who was determined to work for it with all the means in his power. Half an hour's interview to the press would have filled the front page of every paper next morning, would have stiffened public opinion and would have caused enormous, possibly irreparable, damage to the German propaganda machine. At that time the Bulgarian censor was neutral and would not have dreamed of cutting a single word of anything a British ambassador chose to say. And what Sir Stafford might have said would have

made a first-class, first-page story. I know, because I was the only journalist who managed to see him, and that thanks only to a trick.

The British Legation warned all journalists, the foreign correspondents as well as the local press, that Sir Stafford would see no newspapermen. I do not know what the Legation's motives were, but I do know that this decision was not inspired by Sir Stafford himself and that he had no objection to seeing the press.

On the third day of Sir Stafford's visit I was rung up by the most influential leader of the Social Democratic wing of the Bulgarian Labor Party, whom I will call A. He wanted me to do him a favor. He had met Cripps in earlier days at an international Labor Conference and he wanted very much to see him again. When he had tried to get in touch with him through the Legation, where Sir Stafford was staying, he had received the reply that this was not possible, Sir Stafford Cripps was too busy to see anyone. "I only want them to give him the message," A. said. "I know he wouldn't refuse to see me for five minutes." I promised to do what I could and telephoned immediately to the Minister. I explained who A. was and he arranged an interview immediately. The trouble had been that his assistants had never heard of A., who was not a member of the so-called society people invited to receptions there and who, in most cases, later turned out to be the strongest supporters of King Boris' pro-Nazi foreign policy! And yet A. represented one of the most influential pro-allied and democratic movements in the country, for he and his political colleagues controlled the union of co-operative societies, by far the largest economic organization in Bulgaria, comprising thousands of members in every town and village and run on trade-union principles.

(In 1941 Boris' Government placed the union under strict state control and arrested all its leaders.)

When the interview between Cripps and A. was arranged, I asked A. to take me with him as his interpreter. "I've done you a favor, now it's your turn!" I pointed out. A. agreed; he did not know English and my presence would make things easier for him. But he made me give my word of honor not to tell anyone what was said at the interview. I must admit that I have never been so sorely tempted to break my word as during the twenty-four hours that followed. An account of what Sir Stafford told A. about his mission to Moscow, about Stalin, Chamberlain and Churchill, about Abyssinia, Munich and British foreign policy in the ten years that preceded the war would have made headline news in any paper in the world. Any journalist will understand my feelings!

Now that Hitler's attack on Russia has proved to be the biggest mistake he ever made, it is interesting to recall the astounding vision of men who, as far back as June 1940, foresaw war between Russia and Germany. Sir Stafford Cripps was one of them. It must be remembered that at that time Russia's unpopularity in the Anglo-Saxon world was second only to Germany's. These were the days of severed Franco-Russian diplomatic relations. Memories of the war in Finland were still fresh and Communists in France were chalking up "*Pourquoi cette guerre?*" on trucks and engines bound for the front. But Sir Stafford spoke *then* of the German-Russian conflict as inevitable and of Anglo-Russian friendship as essential. When the conversation turned to Stalin it became even more interesting. A. was given a sincere and vivid portrait of the Soviet leader, whom Sir Stafford had visited privately some months before. All Balkan problems with reference to

Russia were discussed at length and, here too, every sentence was a headline, every word a prophecy. Then A. spoke of Munich, pointing out how disastrous it had been for allied prestige in Southeastern Europe. But Sir Stafford had bitterer words than A. for Munich and for the policy that led to it. "That policy made the war possible," he emphasized. "We are paying for it dearly and we shall pay more dearly still in future." Finally A. brought up the problem of the Bulgarian democratic front. He said he was authorized to speak in the name of all the Left Wing democratic movements. They spoke of the organization of the Labor movement and of collaboration with the extreme Left. Cripps did not hesitate to advise total collaboration. "Your Labor movement must be united," he said. "All anti-Fascist forces must work together."

A. was delighted with his interview and, directly we had left the Legation, raced to the house where his friends were waiting for him, eager to hear what Sir Stafford had said. For days all the leading politicians of the Bulgarian democratic front spoke of nothing else. Sir Stafford's words had made a profound impression on them. They had done more for British prestige in Bulgaria than months of propaganda pamphlets or broadcasts. For weeks the German propaganda machine tried hard to combat the results of the interview. And here the Germans unfortunately showed great skill and ingenuity. Their main line was to portray Sir Stafford as *persona non grata* in Moscow. Stories of how Stalin refused to see him and articles about how the Soviets distrusted him were distributed to all the newspapers in Bulgaria. And in the British press office nothing could be done to counteract this pernicious stream of Nazi distortions. For at that time the relations between Britain and Russia were far from happy, and so

British propaganda in the Balkans was obliged to tread very cautiously where Russia was concerned. In Bulgaria of course that was a great disadvantage.

But if British official circles in Sofia were unable to show themselves pro-Russian they wisely adopted a neutral attitude in this respect and at least were never anti-Russian. Unfortunately this task, which required a great expenditure of tact, was not made any easier for them by certain British or American visitors to Bulgaria.

Graver damage was done to British prestige and to the British cause by many of the so-called "semiofficial" visitors who toured the Balkans as private persons, but whose position enabled them to meet the important politicians in every Balkan capital. I will quote only one example—the worst—the visit in the spring of 1940 of Mr. Kenneth de Courcy, secretary of the British Imperial Policy Group and editor of a weekly information letter published in London. His Balkan tour was extensively publicized by his friends, his political significance was grossly exaggerated and the motives of his mission were disastrously misrepresented, with the result that when Kenneth de Courcy arrived in Bulgaria in the spring of 1940 he was regarded by the general public as a personal representative of the British War Cabinet!

His views had a most unfortunate effect on both Bulgarian government circles and on public opinion. Mr. de Courcy was received in a two-hour audience by King Boris. He saw the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and the Press Minister. He held several conferences of important Bulgarian politicians, political writers, journalists and newspaper editors. In these conferences he proved to be violently anti-Russian.

The only achievement of his interviews was to create

resentment against Britain, whom he had represented as Russia's enemy. It was in vain that the British Minister, when he realized the effect de Courcy's utterances had had, issued a statement to the press asserting that de Courcy was only a private individual and had expressed only his personal views. No one believed it. He continued to be regarded as the representative of official Britain.

Four months later, in a conversation with the Bulgarian Foreign Minister, Ivan Popov, when I tried to convince him that Britain would continue the war against the Nazis and had no intention of joining Germany in any crusade against Soviet Russia, he replied: "You read only the British papers. What about Britain's real intentions? She always does the opposite of what her papers say. The de Courcy mission proves that."

Nor did his visit pass unperceived by the Russians. The Russia *Tass* correspondent in Sofia reported Mr. de Courcy's utterances at great length and its effect upon Soviet readers can easily be imagined. It made Soviet circles in Sofia extremely angry. Presumably it made Soviet circles in Moscow angrier still and did nothing to dispel the distrust which Russia harbored toward Britain. Fortunately, it has since disappeared in the light of deeds, not words.

Many people blame individual British ministers in the Balkans for the setbacks to British diplomacy. Apart from the obvious but often forgotten fact that diplomats cannot be held responsible for the foreign policy of the governments they represent and those instructions they obey, I should like to point out that insofar as Bulgaria is concerned no other minister, in my opinion, could have done better than Sir George Rendel who was British Minister in

Sofia from 1938 to 1941. But his possibilities of action were strictly limited. His task was to engineer a delaying action, not to organize an offensive. No naval captain, however skilled, can prevent a sinking ship from going to the bottom of the sea. The most he can do is to delay the sinking. That is what Rendel tried to do and succeeded in doing in Sofia. The view I take is an unpopular one. It is fashionable to brand all the British diplomats in the Balkans as badly informed, slow-witted, lazy civil servants, and I cannot deny that some members of the British Legation staff in Sofia belonged to this category. But Rendel himself, and most of his assistants, were as keen and thorough as enthusiastic workers in a munitions factory.

The fact that diplomats are supposed to confine their relations to official and government circles is also often overlooked. But Rendel realized from the start that Boris' Government did not enjoy the support of public opinion. He got in touch with leading members of the opposition and in particular, in 1939, with the President of the Sobranye (the National Assembly), the energetic and pro-British Stoicho Moshanov. Unfortunately, the result of this was that Parliament was dissolved and Moshanov persecuted. And later in 1940 the Sofia Government kept a close watch on every opposition politician who frequented the British Legation. Thus, in order not to endanger the personal safety of these men, Rendel was obliged to discourage them from their too-frequent visits. There is no doubt that but for the Bulgarian Government's tyrannical attitude Rendel would have continued and enlarged his contacts with opposition circles. Nevertheless his main task was to be in touch with the Government. And the Government was Boris.

There is yet another aspect to this problem. The laby-

rinth of Bulgarian, and indeed of all Balkan, politics is so confused that no foreign observer can grope his way through it in less than two or three years. If, with their knowledge of the countries to which they were accredited, the British and American diplomats in the Balkans had indulged in genuine political warfare, as distinct from purely diplomatic activities, they would certainly have done more harm than good to the allied cause. Political warfare is a delicate and dangerous weapon. Unless one is skilled in its technique it is best not to use it at all.

## CHAPTER X

### *The American Spy*

PETER TSVETKOV was the most popular policeman in our camp. A man of about thirty, short but tough and well built, he had green eyes and fair, almost golden hair. He was hated by the Chief for his friendliness to the prisoners. He was never cruel to us and used neither his whip nor his bayonet to drive us to work, as many of the other policemen did. In secret he distributed cigarettes to the smokers and often managed to pass on old newspapers which we read eagerly. He himself loved reading the papers and took a great interest in politics. Perhaps because of that he was particularly kind to the journalist prisoners, especially to George and me. The fact that we ourselves had "written articles," as he used to say, in the press, some of which he had read, impressed him immensely. He often came to ask our opinion about various political matters. Although a man of limited knowledge—he had had only primary education, which enabled him to read and write—he had an extraordinarily quick mind and an instinctively true judgment where what he called "the situation of the world" was concerned. In spite of the fact that at that time all Government propaganda, taking into account the country's pro-Russian bias, was seeking to prove to the Bulgarian people that Germany and Russia were in fact "military allies" and "inseparable friends," Peter's common sense was not to be misled and he was skeptical about Russo-German relations. (This was in March 1941.)

He had his own explanation for that: Good old Russia, he would argue, had not liberated Bulgaria in order to allow the Germans to occupy her. Good old Russia had liberated Bulgaria in order to have a loyal friend in the Balkans whom she could trust and whom she needed, because good old Russia had interests in the Black Sea and the Straits. Whosoever wanted to occupy Bulgaria, and through her to control the Straits, was automatically good old Russia's enemy. That was that, and it was no good arguing about it. Hitler might make twenty speeches a day and swear one hundred times that he was good old Russia's greatest friend—that couldn't take anybody in. If he were really a friend he would clear out of the Balkans and keep away from the Straits. . . . I often wondered whether this peasant's simple explanation of the importance of the Straits to Russia was not nearer to the truth than the many complicated diplomatic formulas which sought to explain why Russian and German interests could not for long run parallel either in the Balkans or in any other part of Europe.

Peter Tsvetkov was a philosopher as well as a politician. He discoursed at length about God and man, the stars and the sun, the family and the state, the village and the town and so on. He had his own theories about everything, but was always eager to listen to those of others. He loved all forms of discussion. So I wasn't surprised when one day just after lunch, while I was washing my plate and spoon, he came up to me and said that he wanted to see me alone. I left my plate and spoon in the washbasin and joined him, away from the other prisoners. It was only then that I noticed his agitation. His eyes had a haunted look and he no longer spoke in his usual calm slow voice. His coat was unbuttoned, which was odd in itself—he was always very

carefully dressed, and we used to tease him about his extreme neatness. Obviously there was something really wrong, but before I could question him he whispered:

"I want to talk to you seriously, but there's no time now. It's a long story, and we must be completely alone."

I replied that of course I would be only too pleased. I was interested. What could it be? Perhaps some of our friends outside had sent a message. Perhaps they had decided to shoot us and Peter wanted to warn me. Or to set us free?

"Tonight I'll be on duty after midnight," he added. "I'll come into your room to wake you up. We can speak on the terrace outside where nobody can see us. It's very important. . . ."

And he left me as suddenly as he had appeared without another word. I went back to wash my plate and spoon, but in the afternoon while we worked, I couldn't help thinking about my midnight rendezvous. I told George and he seemed surprised. He asked me to wake him up if it turned out to be something really important.

Peter got me up a few minutes after midnight as he had promised. He was even more agitated than before.

"Silence," he whispered. "Don't make a noise. Put your overcoat on. It's chilly tonight. I'll wait for you outside."

And he went out. I put on a thick sweater under my overcoat and as noiselessly as I could I left the room. Peter was waiting for me at the door. We tiptoed to the staircase. He had brought the dustbin, which usually lay near, for me to sit on, and he squatted down beside me, his rifle between his legs.

"Well, what's all this about?"

"I'll tell you the whole story," he replied. "It's about the Saint. She is dying and I don't know what to do."

I turned to him in surprise. "Saint! What saint? You're not joking, are you?"

But I soon realized that he was in deadly earnest. Speaking hurriedly, at moments with tears glistening in his eyes, Peter told me the story of the Saint.

In the first days of March an unusual convoy of prisoners arrived at the local Police Headquarters in Assenovgrad, where Peter was then stationed. They were seven in all, six men and one woman. The men were just ordinary criminals, but it was the seventh prisoner, the woman, who caused the stir. She wasn't an ordinary woman—you could see that at once. She was very frail and thin; you had the feeling that if you touched her she would crumble to pieces. No policeman would have dared to touch her, anyway; she was a saint. The guards who brought her in the train from Sofia had said this, but even if they hadn't Peter and his colleagues would have known immediately. In the first place, although the woman had on only a thin coat, flimsy shoes and silk stockings, she wasn't cold in spite of the violent snowstorm raging outside. The criminals who were warmly clad and muffled up in blankets trembled all the time. The policemen wore their special winter boots and heavy sheepskins, yet they, too, constantly complained of the cold. Only the woman never said a word. She stood alone in the corridor, the icy wind whistling through her hair (she was hatless), yet it was obvious that she did not feel the cold. Her face? One had only to look at it once to remember it forever. It was pale and weary, yet beauty shone from it as from an icon. Her

eyes were dark and warm and deep—deeper than the sea, deeper than the skies.

Who was this woman? She had been arrested as a spy. Her name was Angela. Angela Lazarova. She was said to be a missionary. A Protestant missionary who worked with the Americans. That was why they had arrested her. She spent too much time with the Americans and the British and it was suspected that her missionary work was a cover for other activities. All that of course was nonsense, for how could a saint be a spy? The policemen knew it was untrue but what were they to do? In the Sofia Police Prison where she had stayed several days, the authorities had tried in vain to cross-examine her, but even the most experienced and the most ruthless inspectors had been unable to get anything out of her. She answered every question with a text from the Bible. She knew the whole Bible by heart, Peter added, his eyes wide with awe. And the gold cross which she wore round her neck was a holy cross, for they had wanted to confiscate it, but had not dared.

The official letter from the Sofia police contained instructions that she was to be sent immediately to the women's concentration camp at Sveti Nikola. The Beast gave orders that she should leave at once, escorted by two policemen. It was half past five in the afternoon and it was already quite dark outside. The snowstorm was raging with increasing violence and the wind was so strong that one could hardly walk. To set out at night and in such weather on a six-hour journey through the forest was a fantastic idea that only the Beast could have conceived. Peter and another policeman on duty that night were chosen to accompany the Saint. For the first time in his four years of service with the police force he tried to pro-

test. The Beast banged the table with his fist and barked back at him:

"I won't have that woman here! You do as I say. You're nothing but a coward! Afraid of the snow! You've damned well got to find the camp tonight. Now get out of here!"

Peter left the Beast's office with a heavy heart and went to the dormitory where he and his colleague put on all the thick clothes they could find. They were so weighed down by their heavy sheepskin coats that they could hardly carry their rifles. When they went to fetch the Saint they saw to their dismay that she had no luggage and no clothes other than those, totally inadequate, in which she had arrived. They brought her a pair of boots, heavy soldiers' boots and a thick coat which on her reached down to the ground. She could hardly walk in them but still this was better than nothing. She laughed—it was the first time the policemen had seen her laugh—and they smiled shyly back at her. Then they hoisted two blankets onto their shoulders and thus they set off, the three of them, into the hostile night and into the storm. . . .

It took them half an hour to get out of the town. They walked huddled together, for the Saint was too frail to battle unaided with the fierce wind and Peter and his colleague supported her as best they could, tucking their arms under hers. When eventually they had left the town behind them and arrived at the steep little mountain path that led toward the forest, it must have been about seven o'clock. Peter expected that once they reached the forest it would be less cold and the wind, filtered through the tangled branches of the snow-swept trees, less strong. But it was still more than an hour's walk to the forest and the

hardest walk Peter could remember. The wind had swept the snow into steep banks and there was no sign of the little path. Luckily both Peter and the other man knew the countryside well or they would have been lost for certain. But meanwhile it was becoming dangerously cold. In spite of his thick clothing, Peter felt the icy wind worming its way into his bones. His teeth chattered loudly. His colleague too was trembling but the Saint plodded on steadily without a word.

Finally they reached the forest. Peter realized that his hopes had been vain. True, the wind was not so strong but it was far more difficult to see where one was going. The snow and the trees stretched endlessly ahead of them. They must have walked for an hour before Peter admitted to himself that he had not the faintest idea where they were. He could not recognize any known landmark. All the trees looked alike against the frozen brightness of their background. There were fresh tracks in the snow. A wolf must have passed that way not long before. Peter was not alarmed; he had his rifle and his revolver with him and he had shot many a wolf before that. But he was worried about the Saint. She was walking more slowly and suddenly, without any warning, she collapsed onto the ground.

They rubbed her face and neck with snow but she did not stir. She was as cold as a corpse but she was not dead. She was still breathing, and her breath curled smokily upward into the crisp night air. The situation was desperate. If they lingered they ran the risk of freezing to death. Peter's legs and arms were already quite numb. They must keep on walking. *Walk*—that was the important thing. If they didn't walk they would die. Peter lifted the Saint in his arms like a child. She weighed nothing and he was

astonished to feel her light as a feather against his breast.

Half an hour later, however, Peter's colleague collapsed. He flung himself on the ground and insisted on resting there. Peter knew that if he did, he would not rise again. This is the first stage of the White Death: death by freezing. Exhaustion overcomes you and you feel you must sit down and rest for a few minutes. And then you feel you must sleep. All is well with you, you sleep, you drift into a beautiful haven of dreams, and you wake from your dreams into death. . . .

Peter was really frightened. What was he to do, alone, with a half-dead woman in his arms and a dying friend sprawling in the snow? A vision of the Beast came to his mind, comfortably settled in an armchair beside the fire, puffing at his cigarette, not perturbed by even a prick of remorse at the knowledge that he had sent three people to almost certain death. Peter would have liked to meet him now, here in the forest. He would draw his revolver and shoot him dead. The Beast deserved to die; his conscience, if he had one, had not yet housed its full quota of crimes. There were more to come. . . . Yes, Peter would shoot him gladly. Shoot, yes, shoot . . . shoot? Good God, what a fool he was not to have thought of it before! It was his last hope. He laid the Saint gently down on the snow and fumbled impatiently with his glove. Then he shot right ahead of him into the darkness, first with his revolver, once, twice, three times, and then with his rifle, five cartridges. When the last shot but one was fired, he picked the Saint up and stumbled onward through the snow. He looked back at his colleague, who was lying propped up against a tree. Peter wanted to sit down too and rest. He could not think clearly any longer. Even his brain was numb. He realized that now the end was very

near but he had not the strength to care. He sat down, still holding the Saint in his arms. Her face was as white and as luminous as the snow. She looked like an angel. He was bending over her when suddenly he heard . . . or was it his imagination? A shot. And then another. Someone had heard and heeded his SOS. Help was on its way.

His hands were stiff and he had great difficulty in loading his rifle. With an effort he managed to raise his gun and to pull the trigger. This time there could be no mistake; several shots crackled through the stillness of the forest in answer to his.

"Our rescuers were the two forest guards," Peter continued. "Luckily their hut was quite near. Hearing my shots, they had hurried out, thinking some skiers had lost their way in the storm. By the time they reached us we were all unconscious and they had great difficulty in dragging us to their hut. They gave me several stiff drinks and some burning hot tea and I soon came to. So did my colleague, but he was delirious and in agonies of pain from his frozen legs. The guards told me he would never be able to walk properly again. Actually he stayed in the hut for over a week and then he was sent to the hospital in Plovdiv. I haven't seen him since but I heard that they had to amputate his left leg. They couldn't save it."

Peter paused. I waited eagerly for him to continue.

"They rubbed the Saint's whole body with snow and soon she too revived. She opened her eyes and murmured, 'God bless you.' The guard, too, knew at once that she wasn't an ordinary woman. And they started cursing the Beast. They had always hated him—everyone in the district did. They gave us bread and hot bean soup and I was

so exhausted that I fell asleep where I was. Next morning the storm grew worse and by nightfall it had developed into a real cyclone. The wind was terrific. At times we thought our little hut would be torn out of the ground and flung like a toy down the mountainside. As it was we remained snowbound for three long days and nights. My colleague was in great pain all the time and could not move from his bed. And the Saint began to cough blood. She sat on a little chair by the stove with tears running down her cheeks. She told us that her little boy was desperately ill in Sofia and she could think of nothing else. From time to time she whispered a prayer. Then on the fourth day the weather cleared and we were able to leave. I carried the Saint in my arms all the way to the women's camp. There I handed her over to the authorities, and hurried back here to report to the Beast. I told him the whole story and he seemed quite worried for once. He promised to send two policemen with horses to fetch my colleague, and two days later he was brought down from the hut. And the same day the Saint was sent back from the Sveti Nikola camp. The doctors there said she was dying of consumption. Not the ordinary kind, but what they call galloping consumption, which finishes you off in a couple of months' time. She was taken to the Plovdiv hospital, and the doctor there doesn't think she can live more than another week or so. That's why I decided to ask your advice. What can we do?"

"Frankly, I don't see what you can do, Peter. Perhaps you might try to get a message through to her family. . . ."

"Her family?" he interrupted excitedly. "Her husband's here in the camp and sleeps in your dormitory. It's Assen, your friend Assen Lazarov."

"Good God! Why didn't you say so before?"

"I didn't know myself until today. And I thought I'd better tell you first."

Peter was right. He would be court-martialed if it were discovered that he had confided in one of the prisoners. He had to be careful.

"I'll think it over and see what there is to be done. We'll have another talk in the morning."

I went back to the dormitory and woke George. I couldn't sleep without telling him all I had heard from Peter. Five yards away from us Assen Lazarov was sleeping peacefully. Unknowing, he would joke with us in the morning. . . .

Angela Lazarova had worked with the Americans for more than twenty years. She was a Protestant and most of the Protestant missions and churches in Bulgaria had been established or founded by Americans. She came of a well-to-do family in the Black Sea town of Varna. At the age of eighteen she went to Sofia to study at the university, much to the annoyance of her father, who threatened to disinherit her unless she returned. But his threats were of no avail, for Angela had something in her which most girls of her age and upbringing lack—indomitable strength of character and love of independence. Deprived of all financial support from her family, she decided to do as most of the other students did, to work, or rather starve her way through college. She shared a miserable room somewhere in the suburbs with two or sometimes even with three other girls. She acted as waitress in cheap restaurants in exchange for a plate of food. She worked in shops and offices to earn the meager sum which covered her monthly expenses. A tram ticket was to her a luxury,

and rare were the nights when she did not go to bed hungry. But she spent all her spare time in the university libraries and lecture rooms and worked there with the red-hot enthusiasm which only those who have gone without food to buy a textbook can understand.

During her third year at the university, Angela met Miss Edith Douglass. Miss Douglass was a thirty-five-year-old American with prematurely grayed hair, friendly blue eyes and a heart of gold. She had come to Bulgaria with an American mission when she was not yet twenty and had stayed in the country ever since. Doing good was her profession. The salary she received from the mission was a very humble one, even by Bulgarian standards, yet she lived on only a quarter of it; the rest went to those whose need was more urgent than her own. She came across Angela at Christmastime while she was touring the poor quarter of the city with gifts she had collected among her richer friends. Angela and Miss Douglass understood each other from the first. Miss Douglass was charmed by the girl's vivacity and her gay, childlike enthusiasm. Angela, too, was impressed by Miss Douglass and indeed it was impossible not to be. The warmth of her smile and the goodness that radiated from her personality thawed all hearts. Angela admired her obstinate refusal to recognize evil in the world and in the people around her, and her cheerful determination to surmount all obstacles in the path she had chosen. They had much in common, the student girl who had foregone a life of effortless plenty to fight her eager battle with poverty and hardships in the quest of knowledge, and the missionary who had left her home and had come thousands of miles to devote her life to the poor and needy, and they soon became firm friends.

After Angela had taken her degree she joined Miss

Douglass, and for many years was her most loyal and devoted assistant. Miss Douglass received larger funds from America and together with Angela she organized welfare centers, helped the hospitals, founded kindergartens and established several girls' training schools. She visited factories, schools and villages all over the country and Angela accompanied her wherever she went. When Angela was twenty-five she married Assen Lazarov, an energetic young businessman who had helped her and Miss Douglass in their work in every way he could. After her two children were born she had less time to spare for her work with Miss Douglass and gradually her love of humanity was diverted into a more personal channel. She adored her little boys. But her friendship with Miss Douglass remained undiminished.

Meanwhile Assen had been obliged to move to the Black Sea port of Burgas to open a new branch of his office there. His business prospered and he soon became very rich. Angela remained behind in Sofia with the two boys, who were at school there. When war broke out Assen was nearly ruined; his business, which was connected largely with shipping, was brought almost to a standstill, but thanks to his energy and his skill he managed somehow to survive.

As for Angela, the war found her busy with social work again. Miss Douglass had left some months before for America and it seemed improbable that she would be able to return, so the burden of all her many charitable organizations fell on Angela's shoulders. She met all Miss Douglass' old friends, teachers from the American schools and colleges in Sofia and the provinces. The work she did for students' libraries and hostels brought her into contact with the English-Speaking League of Sofia, and later with

the British Institute which controlled the League. It never occurred to her that her activities could possibly be considered suspicious by the police. Nor did she nor could she know that the police was now controlled by younger men who had undergone a two-year course of special police training in Berlin and Rome, and who had orders to suspect anyone and everyone who had any contacts whatsoever with the Anglo-Saxon community.

Thus when Angela's frequent visits to the English-Speaking League were first reported to the police, the chief of the department that dealt with "Anglo-American affairs" sent one of his detectives to shadow her. His reports were very revealing. It appeared that every day Angela Lazarova visited those parts of the capital which were, from a military point of view, the most important: the quarters round the munitions depots, the central radio station, the factories, the barracks. All that was most interesting for the Chief of the Anglo-American department. He traced the unsuspecting Angela's entire family and of course he soon unearthed another suggestive fact: her husband lived in the port of Burgas and his business was connected with ships and shipping. Moreover he was actually working in the forbidden area of the port itself. From then on Angela's dossier and Assen's dossier bore the heading "suspect" and soon it was modified to "very suspect." A policeman was attached permanently to Angela's person and ordered to report her every movement to headquarters, and the Burgas police received instructions to subject Assen Lazarov to the closest supervision.

It mattered little to the Sofia police that the quarter of the capital which was militarily the most important was also the poorest; it was there that the workers' families

lived whose homes Angela visited regularly. Nor did the Burgas police take into account the fact that it was the customs building, situated in the forbidden area of the port, which each merchant in the town visited daily on business. The evidence was conclusive.

In December 1940 Assen Lazarov was called up and sent to the Turko-Bulgarian frontier. All the Bulgarian troops were being concentrated there in accordance with General List's instructions. Under cover of secrecy his staff was already working in Sofia and the whole Balkan campaign was organized from there. General List was later to become Commander in Chief of the armies that invaded Greece and Yugoslavia, and eventually he became a Field Marshal.

Assen stayed about three months at the frontier, digging trenches and working on the fortifications which the German organization Todt was building. He welcomed the day of the Germans' official arrival in Bulgaria—March 2—for it was on that same day that he was ordered to go back to Burgas. He had never been interested in politics and he took a purely selfish interest in the war, which he deplored but only because it had had such a disastrous effect on his business. He did not like the Germans. He did not like them because they had obliged his country to mobilize and were therefore responsible for *his* being mobilized. . . .

On his arrival in Burgas Assen went immediately to report to the local regimental headquarters. The barracks were crammed with soldiers and it was obvious the country was under complete mobilization. The men who had just been called up looked tired and sullen and were not unnaturally loath to exchange their cosy sheepskins for

papery uniforms. Assen had to wait some time before he was received by the officer on duty.

"Assen Lazarov?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're under arrest."

Assen could not believe his ears.

"Under arrest? But . . . I . . . there must be a mistake somewhere," he stammered.

"I know nothing at all about your case, my boy." The officer was friendly enough and was clearly telling the truth. "All I know is that I have orders to arrest you and to hand you over to the police. They never used to do that. It's some new system. You're the fourth man I've handed over to them today."

"But am I demobilized?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"But I can't be arrested by the police while I'm still in the army."

"You couldn't be before. Things are different now."

The officer was obviously bored with the whole proceeding and he looked up with relief as two plain-clothes men entered the room. They took charge of Assen, bundled him into a car and drove with him to the Police Prison where he stayed four days, completely in the dark as to what had happened, who had arrested him, or why. On the fifth day he was taken with four other men to the railway station and pushed into a third-class carriage marked "Prisoners. Forbidden to approach." In it were fifty other men, all as bewildered as he was himself, cold, unshaven, filthy. Two elderly men were crying silently and a boy, hardly more than a child, was denouncing Fascism in a high-pitched hysterical voice. Not one of these prisoners knew why he had been arrested and not a

single one of them had been interrogated by the police or by any other authority. Among them were seven soldiers who, like Assen, had been brought back from the trenches without a word of explanation. There were teachers who had been arrested in their classrooms, workers who had been picked up in their factories, doctors who had been hauled out of bed at two in the morning, dock workers who had been rounded up while they were unloading ships in the harbor.

The train left that evening and by the time it reached Plovdiv next day Assen's nerves had given way. "Murderers! Bloody murderers," he screamed. It was then that I saw him for the first time. He was still whimpering when they brought him to our cell in the Plovdiv Railway Station Prison. "Leave him alone," George whispered to me. "He'll soon calm down."

Meanwhile Angela, who had no inkling of her husband's fate, was crying bitterly in her Sofia flat. Her little son Dima had been seriously hurt in an accident. Her neighbor, a retired colonel now back in uniform, was trying to soothe her. "Try not to worry. I was just next to the child on the pavement when it happened and I shouted at him but he didn't hear me. He was knocked down by the car but they stopped it in time and it didn't go over him. Being Germans they don't know the streets well and they didn't see that it was a one-way street."

"Oh, these Huns," she moaned. "They bring misfortune wherever they go."

The ambulance arrived to take Dima to the hospital. There he stayed two hours in the operating theater. Three of his ribs were broken, the lower part of his chest was badly smashed and both his hands had been crushed by the

wheels of the truck. For it was not a car, as the colonel had pretended to Angela, but one of the many hundreds of German military lorries that had invaded the capital in the last few days. The doctors were not very hopeful.

In the early hours of the morning Angela went back from the hospital to her flat to snatch a few hours' sleep. It was there that she was arrested.

The Chief of the Anglo-American department in the secret police was feeling well pleased with himself when he sat down to his breakfast. That night his agents had successfully carried out his instructions: another group of seventy "Anglo-American" agents were safely in jail. That brought the total to three hundred thirty-six for the last four days. Good going. His swift action had saved the country from the great internal disorders which those traitors in British pay might have staged to coincide with the arrival of the German troops. The Germans—yes, the Germans—should be grateful. Herr Drexler could be proud of him.

The Chief glanced again through his list of suspects as he sipped his coffee. He read out their names, relishing each syllable. Politicians, ex-ministers, journalists, officials, workers—men and women.

He pressed the bell and asked the plain-clothes man who answered it:

"How did Lazarova behave?"

"She wouldn't open the door so we had to break it in."

"And then?"

"She began to scream. A boy in pajamas came into her room. We identified him as her son. We hit him on the head and he didn't give us any more trouble. We gagged the woman with a towel and brought her here. She's in

cell 1. Still shouting something about her child and a hospital. And curses the Germans for killing a certain Dina or Dima. When I went in last time she was praying."

"She can't fool us with her religious activities. She's an American spy."

"Though she's a Protestant she wears a big crucifix on her breast. She has it still."

"Why wasn't it confiscated as it should have been?"

"The orderly tried to take it from her, but . . ."

"Go on."

"He couldn't."

"What the hell do you mean—couldn't?"

"Just that. She shouted: 'Don't touch the cross—the Lord will punish you!' and looked at him. God, you should see her eyes!"

"What's the matter with you? Were you drunk?"

"No." The man lowered his eyes, ill at ease.

"Then why in God's name didn't you get hold of that cross?"

"I couldn't. Honestly I couldn't. I can't explain it. There's something about that woman. She looked at me and that was enough."

"You bloody fool! To be scared of a woman and just a low-down spy at that! Get out of here and fetch me Lazarova."

But neither the Chief nor his assistants, men notorious for their sadistic brutality, could do anything with Angela. When they threatened her with starvation she merely replied: "Christ has said man shall not live by bread alone." They threatened her with torture and one night they dragged her to the torture chamber on the third floor. Her serenity undaunted, she whispered: "God forgive them for they know not what they do." They

threatened her with death but her attitude remained unchanged. Gradually in the Police Building her legend grew. The ordinary policemen, for the most part simple kindhearted peasants, began to look on her as a holy being. They christened her the Saint and the name stuck. At night they would come to her cell. They listened reverently as she meted out to them soft words of comfort and hope of better times to come. In their minds there was no doubt at all; she was a saint.

The Chief, realizing his failure, ordered that she should be sent to the women's concentration camp at Sveti Nikola, near Assenovgrad, which was where Peter Tsvetkov saw her for the first time.

That was the story of Angela Lazarova. George and I lay awake that night wondering what we were to tell Assen next day. I knew from Peter that Angela's boy, Dima, had died in the hospital several hours after her arrest, but she did not know that. Nor of course did Assen, who imagined that his wife and children were at home and safe in Sofia.

Eventually we decided that we could not take the responsibility of withholding the truth from Assen, especially as there might still be a faint chance of his saving Angela through the intervention of friends or perhaps even a petition to the Government. When we told him he turned away and muttered: "I believe *now* I could kill someone." But there was nothing he could do to help his wife—nothing at all. He asked us not to tell any of the other prisoners what had happened and none of them ever guessed. He went through hell but his self-control never faltered. He lived like the rest of us—working and sleeping, joking and cursing.

At the end of May, Peter was sent away to another camp. The Beast had noticed that he was on friendly terms with us and that was evidence against him. In July —after I had left the camp—he returned there. I had one message from him through another policeman. In it he said that Assen had still not been released. Two months later Peter was killed while on duty near by, by a group of courageous young workers who attacked the camp in a vain but daring attempt to free the prisoners.

I lost trace of Angela as well. She was removed from the hospital in Plovdiv and sent God knows where. Then I heard she had died, but all the policemen I met denied this—a saint couldn't just die like that. Since then I have heard her story many a time from policemen and outlaws alike. It had spread through the underground world of the country and become a real legend.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Taxi Drivers to the Rescue*

THE most pleasant time of day in the camp was after half past seven in the evening. We were not allowed to leave the building after that hour; indeed the sentries had orders to shoot at sight if anyone attempted to do so. So we all used to forgather in one of the bigger dormitories and, having neither books nor newspapers, we whiled away the hours telling one another the story of our experiences. One night George told us his impressions of Stalin, whom he had met at a ceremony in Moscow some years before. Vlado Trichkov, one of the toughest members of the Workers' group, gave us a fascinating account in three installments of the Spanish War, in which he had taken an active part from beginning to end. On another occasion he treated us to a detailed description of all the prisons of Europe, which led to the surprising conclusion that those of pre-Anschluss Austria were the best. Several of his listeners who were also authorities on the subject agreed unanimously.

An amusing episode was told us by Lazar Popovski, a Sofia journalist and owner of the paper *Kambana* (The Bell) which had been suppressed by the Government. In 1924 he had been appointed Bulgarian Minister to Albania. He was a bitter enemy of the Macedonian Terrorist organization and did not pretend to be anything else. In such cases the Macedonian Terrorists did not wait for opportunities of revenge. They supplied them.

One day a man called at the Legation in Tirana. He was, he alleged, the bearer of a letter from Popovski's father and he was shown into the Minister's study. It was obvious that the man was in a state of acute nervous tension and when he plunged his hand into his pocket Popovski drew his revolver. Just in time. The man's hand quivered and Popovski shot first. His aim was accurate and he shot the murderer in the hand. The man confessed that he had been sent by one of the Macedonian leaders and, while Popovski was telling us the story, it transpired that this Macedonian leader was not only in the camp, but that he was in Popovski's dormitory and had become his best friend! He had been converted to milder methods of political warfare and I am glad to say that even after Popovski had identified him their friendship continued unabated.

The story which I told when my turn came was the only one that had nothing to do with political intrigues, assassinations or *coups d'état*. It was merely the story of a scandal. . . .

It was about six in the morning of Sunday, February 24. To my intense annoyance I was awakened by the telephone. It was Bob Griggs, one of the secretaries at the American Legation.

"You must come round to the Legation at once. The Minister wants to see you, and all the other guys are here already."

I cursed Bob and his entire Legation, dismissed the whole thing as a feeble practical joke and rang off. But in vain. Bob telephoned again and assured me that he was in earnest. I hopped out of bed and into a pair of trousers and sallied forth. The taxi driver looked up at me in alarm.

"Good God, has another war started?"

"No, I think this one will do for the time being."

But he was not convinced and as he started his engine I heard him mutter:

"You damned journalists don't usually get up at six just for the fun of the thing."

When I arrived at the Legation I found Bob St. John, with no tie on and his sleeves rolled up, pounding away at a typewriter. The UP correspondent, Hugo Spaek, was pacing up and down the room with Bob Griggs. Most of the other journalists were there too and so was Earle. Earle looked as if he had just had a shower and had forgotten to take off his clothes first. His trousers were sopping. His shirt was torn and had slipped off one shoulder and on that shoulder a large dark bruise was embossed.

"See that?" he growled. Everyone stopped talking and began pelting me with accounts of what had happened and how and why.

One hour before that, the Minister, Bob St. John and Hugo Spaek had been sitting at a table in Maxim's bar, peacefully drinking bad brandy. They were bored and tired and were just about to leave when, to please the Minister, the orchestra launched into "Tipperary." It was late and the place was practically empty but at the table opposite was a large group of men. One of them rose from his seat and ordered the band leader to stop. The manager hurried over and explained to Earle that these gentlemen were German officers in civilian disguise and that they considered the playing of "Tipperary" a gratuitous insult to the German army. Earle nodded, beckoned to the band leader and slipped a large note into his hand.

"Tipperary" was resumed. The Germans got up and shouted to Earle that he must stop it at once. "This is a

neutral country," the Minister yelled back, "and I shall listen to whatever music I choose." The Germans fell back on a more effective method of enforcing their will and sent another, larger tip to the orchestra, which duly responded with a languorous tango. Earle foraged in his pocketbook and "Tipperary" was played once more. This was more than the Germans could bear and one of them hurled a bottle of champagne at Earle's head. He ducked and it hit him on the arm. Nothing loath, he picked up an empty bottle from his own table and flung it at the German, scoring a direct hit on the latter's skull.

The officer collapsed. The blood was streaming from his head. The orchestra stopped playing ("Tipperary" or anything else) and fled, the manager faded away into a noninterventionist faint, women screamed, the lights went out and the only person who kept his head was an anonymous scoundrel who got away with the entire contents of the till.

The Germans could not allow this defeat to pass unavenged. They abandoned their bleeding comrade to his fate and concentrated on the Minister. There were ten of them. They attacked according to the Schlieffen plan with a spearhead movement of their right flank. This enabled the Americans to withdraw to a strategically more advantageous position, with torn coats and trousers as only casualties. They dug themselves in behind two tables and had almost exhausted their supply of glasses and bottles—their only ammunition—by the time help came.

Help came in the shape of fifteen hefty taxi drivers. Their rank was just across the road and one of the waiters had had the good idea of requesting their services. Earle, Bob and Hugo were all three their best and most generous customers and they took to the fray with great gusto. They pushed back the Germans, shepherded the Americans

out of the bar and into a taxi which drove them straight to the Legation.

Naturally the whole incident created a terrific sensation; before Pearl Harbor it was not customary for American diplomats to break the heads of German officers. For that was what Earle had done or very nearly. The German hovered between life and death for a week but then decided to recover, fortunately for Earle. There is no doubt that if he had died the Germans in Sofia would have bumped off Earle. In any case Maxim's was a well-known German haunt and half its staff were on the Gestapo's pay roll. Two weeks before, Colonel Donovan's wallet had been stolen when he had gone there with the Minister to recover from a dreary official reception. Some days later it was of course "found" by the police and brought with due ceremony to the Legation. Nothing was missing, but there was no doubt that all the papers it contained had been carefully photographed. Luckily none of them was important; it contained only a couple of letters of introduction and a checkbook.

The next day all the American agencies clamored for dispatches about Earle's fight. Voices were raised in the American Senate against Earle, but the Sofia Legation was flooded with telegrams from all over America. "Well done, George!" "Hit the Hun again, George!" "Hope you knocked him out," etc.

As the German got better the scandal subsided. The person who had most cause to remember it was one of the ladies of the establishment—Lucie, a charming brunette singer who sided enthusiastically with the Americans during the fight and threw several ash trays at the Germans. The result was that she was promptly arrested and interned in a village. But there she met and married a rich and elderly businessman so her story had a happy ending too.

## CHAPTER XII

### *Stalin Proposes, Hitler Disposes*

THE majority of the prisoners in the camp were the so-called "pacifists." They came from all over the country and represented every different aspect of social activity—teachers, engineers, merchants, government officials, doctors, students, writers, workmen and peasants. These pacifists were the victims of an event which might very easily have changed the whole course of the war in South-eastern Europe.

On November 13, 1940, the Russian Foreign Minister, who was at that time also the Prime Minister, Viacheslav Molotov, arrived in Berlin on a state visit. As Hitler later declared in his proclamation of June 22, 1941, this visit marked the first clash between Russian and German interests in Europe. The official white books issued by the Wilhelmstrasse attribute it not only to differences of opinion over Poland and the Baltic states, but above all to Russia's determination not to abdicate her sphere of influence in the Balkans. There can be little doubt that it was during Molotov's visit that Hitler decided to attack Russia, for it was then that he realized clearly that Stalin was not willing to fall in with his plans. As soon as that visit ended Hitler launched a diplomatic offensive, the purpose of which was to pave the way for his military offensive against Russia.

Two days after Molotov's departure Hitler summoned

King Boris to Berchtesgaden. Their conversations lasted two days and Boris was informed of the role Bulgaria would be required to play in Germany's political offensive in the Balkans. From the German point of view it was a very valuable role. I have already described Hitler's instructions to Boris concerning the Rumanian oil fields. Here I shall deal briefly with Boris' most important contribution to the success of Germany's plan.

At the Berchtesgaden meeting Hitler and Ribbentrop threatened Boris with an increase of Russian influence in the Balkans. Boris was more perturbed by visions of the Red flag than any bull by a red rag. If those forces which already opposed his nationalistic policy received strengthened support from Moscow, there was no more hope for his dynasty. He quickly agreed to take all his cues from Hitler. So did Paul in Yugoslavia (who for the same reasons preferred the Germans to the Russians). So did Antonescu in Rumania. Incidentally, the anti-Russian German drive in the Balkans in the winter of 1940-1941 was one of the best-kept secrets of the war; officially the German propaganda machine did not slacken in its fulsome praise of Germany's Russian "ally"!

On his return from Berchtesgaden to Sofia, Boris had to deal with the first open anti-German move on the part of Russia since the Russo-German pact of August 1939. Alexander Sobolev, Secretary General of the Soviet Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, arrived in Sofia and in his audience with Boris laid before him the very proposals against which the King had just been warned by Hitler. (In his proclamation of June 22, 1941, Hitler alleges that he discussed these proposals with Molotov during the latter's visit to Berlin in November 1940.) The Soviet Government proposed that a pact of mutual assistance—in

other words a military alliance—be signed immediately by Russia and Bulgaria. Russia was thereby prepared to guarantee the neutrality and integrity of Bulgaria, to provide a market for almost all Bulgaria's exports and to declare officially to the whole world that whosoever laid a finger on Bulgaria would have the Red Army to contend with. All that Russia requested in exchange was certain facilities for her Black Sea fleet in Varna and Burgas, and also permission to expand at her own expense the Burgas airport. There was already a Russian civil airport near Burgas, for the Aeroflot Sofia-Moscow service.

Boris told Sobolev that his proposals would be examined by the Cabinet and that the Bulgarian reply would be handed to the Soviet Minister in Sofia. Sobolev went, the Soviet Minister waited . . . and the reply never came! Meanwhile the Russians, not unnaturally, grew impatient. They were well aware that their proposals would have been enthusiastically welcomed by the whole of the Bulgarian people. They also suspected—and very rightly—that in obedience to German instructions Boris' Government was determined to keep the proposals secret for as long as was feasible. If the problem were postponed long enough the Germans would have a breathing space in which to speed up their military preparations in Rumania. So the Russians threw diplomatic etiquette to the winds and informed the Bulgarian political parties of their proposal, knowing that these would press the Government to accept it.

This was in fact what happened. All the political parties, with the full support of the Military League, passed separate and joint resolutions which they sent to the Government, urging immediate acceptance of the Soviet proposals. The reaction of the Sobranye was more surprising

when one remembers that its majority, elected under police pressure, supported the Government. The President told me in December that with six exceptions all the deputies (160 in all) had handed him petitions in favor of the Russian proposals to transmit to the Government. And in his room were sheaves of telegrams from all over the country urging the Government to accept the proposals—130,000 in less than three weeks! By the end of December he had received 200,000. It was estimated that they were signed by 1,500,000 people (this exceeded the number of election-time voters).

The Government was frightened. The Sobranye was restless. It was then that Boris engineered one of the most cunning coups of his career. His German masters must have been proud of him. . . .

At that time the entire country was flooded with illegal leaflets. "Russia guarantees our neutrality! Bulgarians, demand the immediate conclusion of a military alliance!" Every house in Sofia (including the British and German Legations, the Palace and all the Government offices) had "Pact with Russia!" scrawled in chalk on its walls. Shortly afterward a second wave of leaflets flooded the country. The text was the same—almost. "Bulgarians, demand immediate acceptance of the Soviet proposals. Russia guarantees our neutrality *and offers us the Aegean coast!*" These leaflets were followed a week later by another batch. The third lot of leaflets had "and Turkish Thrace" added to the promise of the Aegean coast.

What did all this mean?

The first leaflets had been produced by the Workers, and were the only genuine ones. Boris was too clever to defy openly the Workers' challenge. The telegrams to the Sobranye had been a clear enough indication of public opin-

ion. He had more leaflets printed and added to the text the promise of the Aegean coast as a bait to suspicion. The Aegean coast was, as all Bulgarians knew, Greek territory. This meant that Russia was willing to sacrifice Greek interests. This meant that Russia was against Greece. But Greece was at war with Italy and Italy was Germany's ally. This could mean only that Germany, Italy and Russia were working together. This was what Boris wanted the Bulgarians to believe; that Russia and Germany were allies.

The third batch of leaflets were German! They included Turkish Thrace in the territories Russia had promised to Bulgaria and they were not for Bulgarian but for Turkish consumption. This enabled the Germans to sow suspicion of Russia among the Turks and to exploit the dangers of Bolshevik policy!

It was in vain that the Worker leaders tried to explain the difference between the different leaflets. It was too late. Everyone was completely confused. I was myself. I was too naïve to perceive how the Germans had exploited an achievement of enemy propaganda for their own ends. But it was typical of their unscrupulous realism. (It was thus that, later, they adopted and adapted the "V for Victory" sign after the success of the anti-German V-campaign.)

By the end of December, in spite of the great fight on the leaflet front, the situation in Sofia was very tense. The Foreign Minister, Ivan Popov, not daring to put in an appearance either in the assembly or at his ministry, was confined to his house by an acute diplomatic illness. Boris ordered rumors to be spread according to which the Bulgarian minister in Moscow was "negotiating" with the Soviet Government. It was of course a lie; Ivan Stame-

nov, one of the ablest Bulgarian diplomats and a whole-hearted supporter of Russo-Bulgarian co-operation, was kept in complete darkness about all the Sofia maneuvers. Finally in January the Government papers published leading articles about the Soviet proposals and accused them of being an attempt "to drag Bulgaria into the War" by promising her territories of neighboring countries with which she was in friendly relations. (This, of course, Russia had never done.) The object was to gain time and pave the way for the arrival of the Germans.

Would a Bulgarian military alliance with Russia in 1940 have changed the course of the war in the Balkans? I think so. Had the pact been concluded Hitler would not have been able to walk into Bulgaria as he did, because that would have meant war with Russia—war with Russia six months earlier than his schedule allowed. Without his bases in Bulgaria he would not have been able to attack the gallant Greek armies in the North and to smash their resistance so soon. A Balkan front of Yugoslav, Greek and Bulgarian forces, backed by Russia, and by Britain via the Middle East, might have made a great difference.

I have often wondered why this Russian initiative in Bulgaria, which, however one may look at, was predominantly an anti-German one, did not receive greater attention in the calculations of allied diplomacy. I have heard the explanation that at that time Britain was not willing to lift a finger to help Russia, even if by so doing she could harm Germany. As far as British diplomacy in Bulgaria is concerned this is an unfair criticism. I knew the Minister, Sir George Rendel, well and I think I can safely say that he would not have hesitated to advise the Bulgarian Gov-

ernment to accept the Soviet proposals. But he never had the opportunity of doing so. The Bulgarian Foreign Ministry never officially acknowledged the existence of these proposals. Nor—as far as I know—did the Russian Legation in Sofia inform any of the foreign diplomats in Sofia of them. Officially these proposals were dismissed as “Communist propaganda” by the Sofia Government. The responsibility for rejecting them therefore lies with King Boris and his ministers and with nobody else. At Berchtesgaden in November Boris had irrevocably bound up Bulgaria’s fate with Germany, and the object of all his maneuvers that winter was to prepare the Bulgarian people for a *fait accompli* of which they still knew nothing.

Thus the Russian pact failed. In March 1941, after the arrival of the Germans and with the assistance of the Gestapo, a campaign of wholesale arrests was started. The “pactists”—those who had sent telegrams to Parliament requesting a Russo-Bulgarian military alliance—were hunted down. It was, of course, impossible for the Police to arrest 1,500,000 people, so they arrested only the most prominent citizens among those who had signed the telegrams—in all, between 5,000 and 7,000 men and women. The most “dangerous” men—about 250 of them—were sent to our camp. They were known as the “Pactists,” as opposed to the Workers, the Agrarians, the “nonparty” men, the Macedonians, and the “Anglo-Americans” like myself. The building that housed them was nicknamed the “Post Office,” to remind them of their ill-fated telegraphic adventures. Most of them vowed never to go near another post office as long as they lived! That is, if they had another opportunity of doing so.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *The Conference*

AMONG the prisoners in the camp were fifteen doctors and we thanked God for them. I tremble to think what it would have been like had they not been there. In the mornings they reported any cases of illness to the Police Chief. In theory those who were ill were exempted from going out to work, but in practice this depended entirely upon whether the Chief was in a bad or a good mood. The latter occurrence was so infrequent that usually, when all the other prisoners had gone to their work on the road, he would send the sick men to sweep the camp or to work in the kitchen. This special work was often so arduous that these men generally preferred to avoid the doubtful benefits of ill health. They refused to allow the doctors to report them and instead tottered out to the regular work on the road.

Of all the doctors by far the ablest was a tall stout fellow with a pleasant face and light-blue eyes. He was about sixty, always smiling and always busy. His name was Paul Tagov, but we called him Dr. Paul, or simply "the Doctor." He was a practist and he died early in June 1941. I never knew the exact date for he was sent from camp to the hospital and he died there.

The Doctor's death was a great shock to everyone in the camp. He died of spotted typhus, that terrible disease which, in the Balkans, is second only to the plague in its

crushing death rate. The peasants call it the Black Death. It is a disease of the blood, contracted through and carried by lice. It comes upon one suddenly in the form of a high fever which blazes for three or four days. If one's heart is strong enough one stands some chance of survival, but more than sixty percent of the cases are fatal. The frightening thing about this illness, however, is the fact that it rapidly develops into an epidemic wherever there are many people living in close proximity.

In the early days of June the dreaded shadow of typhus fell on our camp, though at first we did not recognize it for what it was. Ten or twelve men developed a high temperature one evening. Dr. Paul looked very worried and went several times to see the Police Chief in his room. Two days later these men were sent down into the town and from there to the prison hospital in Plovdiv. Later a policeman told us that all of them had died. And then suddenly Dr. Paul fell ill.

At midnight he staggered from his "bed" and yelled at the top of his voice:

"Get up, everybody!"

We tried to soothe him but he did not recognize us.

"My family have arrived!" he shouted. "My wife and my two girls. Go and tell them I'm all right and that I'll be coming home soon." He stopped dead and glowered at us. "Don't you dare touch me, you dirty police swine. Yes, I signed that telegram! I'm against the Germans and against the King and against the Government! Hands off!" Then his tone changed. His voice subsided into a whimper. "Please let me see them, Inspector. I haven't had any news of them for seven months. I shall forget their faces. Please, please, let me see them. . . ."

We managed to make him lie down and the doctors

hovered round but there was nothing they could do. At five when the policemen came to fetch him he was unconscious. They strapped him with ropes to one of the horses and that is how he was taken to the hospital, a ride of more than five hours.

We never saw him again. The policemen told us that before he died his wife was sent for, but he never regained consciousness. In spite of that she was not allowed to be alone with him. Two policemen stayed in his room night and day; he died under police escort.

We were very upset and refused to work on the road. In fact our behavior was so bad that a hundred extra policemen were sent for by the Police Chief who was afraid we might revolt. This infuriated us still further and we continued to refuse to work, whereupon the Chief ordered us to clean out our dormitories. A clever trick, for he knew how terrified we all were of typhus.

In the evening a special police messenger arrived from the town and reported to the Chief. After he had left the Chief summoned us all into the yard.

"I am sorry to inform you," he began, "that I have just received a letter from Police Headquarters. There is an epidemic of typhus in the camp. As you know, this disease is a very dangerous one. The police in this letter pronounce the camp to be an isolated place, where all of us will be confined until the epidemic has been stamped out."

He had made himself quite clear. There was typhus in the camp officially; and we were to be completely isolated from the rest of the country until the danger had passed. What better place for isolation than a concentration camp? Usually in the Balkans, if there is a dangerous epidemic in any village or district, that village or district is proclaimed

"dangerous." All movements in and out of it are stopped. Centuries ago the same principle was applied to villages and towns where there was a plague.

The Chief continued:

"For health reasons, from now on, I forbid all contact between the police guards and yourselves. I shall draw a demarcation line around the buildings where the policemen live, and no one will be allowed to cross that line. The food will be brought to the place where you eat by the cook, but you will be permitted to go and get it only after he has left. In the meantime I shall increase the police guards."

We were terribly depressed by that speech. No one spoke. The policemen immediately paired off, rifles in hand. The machine guns, which until then had been inside the police building, were taken out and placed in front of our buildings. From now on we were in solitary confinement with disease and with death.

The situation in our camp was really alarming. The sanitary conditions were appalling. We all slept in crowded dormitories, jammed together on the floor like sardines in a tin. There was no possible way of preventing lice from crawling from one person to another. Lice were the carriers of typhus. And we all had lice.

Every one of us became "lice conscious." We saw lice everywhere. Every minute men undressed in search of lice. Whenever a louse was found it was taken in a most ceremonious manner to the stove, there to meet a terrible death. We were frightened of each other, of every man who had found lice on his body. Our anxiety took refuge in silly jokes, but they didn't help and no one laughed at them.

"Stop annoying me or I'll throw a louse at you."

"You needn't worry, you're so tough no louse would condescend to bite you anyway!"

I must have fallen asleep at midnight and it was two o'clock in the morning when George woke me.

"Be quiet! Get up and follow me into the other room."

"What's the matter?"

"There's a conference in the Red Hall. Hurry!"

I put on my coat, and soundlessly we tiptoed to the door. Silently we entered the Red Hall, which was the next dormitory to ours.

I soon realized what the arrangement was. On the Workers' initiative a conference was to be held in this room. For each of us who had come from other dormitories, the Workers had sent one of their boys to lie down in our places, so that when the police inspection came there should be nothing unusual. By their voices I soon recognized the other men present. Ivan Danchev, one of the Worker leaders, presided.

"We have a most important problem to face," he began. "And a very simple one. We must do something to improve the conditions here. If we don't we shall all die. We must first of all consider whether it is possible for any one of us to escape."

"It's not possible," George interrupted. "Even if it were it would still be a crazy idea."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Because from now on we're isolated not for political but for health reasons. We are a public danger and it's imperative that we be isolated from the rest of the country. I know the law."

"But aren't they obliged to look after the isolated places?"

"Of course they are. They are obliged to send special medical committees to investigate."

"Then they have to send doctors here as well?"

"They have to, but they won't. You can be sure of that. I'll tell you why . . ."

He did not finish his sentence. We heard the thud of approaching footsteps in the corridor outside.

"Pretend to be asleep," Ivan whispered. I hid under the blanket. Silence reigned. Then suddenly, near me, a terrific snore exploded into the stillness.

"Count them from here," one of the policemen said.  
"Don't go in. . . ."

"O.K.?"

"Yes. All here."

They left the room.

"You should not have been so silent, you idiots," George broke the silence. "You were supposed to pretend you were *asleep*, not dead! At least ten of you should have snored, because that is what's normal in any dormitory, as I know to my cost. If you had more brains than a louse"—not a very happy metaphor, I thought—"you would have noticed long ago that when one enters one of our dormitories, one is deafened by noises of snoring. But of course you have no brains. Only I snored!"

We could not be angry with him because he was absolutely right. He certainly seemed better fitted to deal with such things than the rest of us; so we kept a respectful silence, when he spoke again.

"The police in Sofia have been told that there's typhus in this camp. Perhaps the Minister of the Interior knows of it, but it's more probable that he doesn't. I don't suppose he has been told. Don't forget that typhus is the most dangerous disease in Bulgaria. Don't forget that if an epi-

demic breaks out thousands of people may die in a few weeks. And don't forget that if the thing becomes known there will be a terrible scandal. First of all, in Assenovgrad. Then the health authorities will get panicky, knowing how helpless they'll be if the epidemic spreads. That is why I think that, if we want to save ourselves, we must somehow send a message to our friends in Sofia. They will see to it that the health authorities hear of the affair. The Sobranye must be told and then, and then only, will we get medical assistance. But it's not exactly easy!"

The only man that would have been willing to help us, Peter Tsvetkov the policeman, had already left the camp by then. The usual Workers' "channels" were too slow.

"It's not so difficult as you think. Do you know the village of Bachkovo?" Ivan retorted.

"Well, what about it?"

"We have a loyal friend there and he'll deliver any message to Sofia for us."

"And who will deliver the message to him?"

"That's what we're here to decide," Ivan replied.

The discussion continued for another hour. The guards came in again and this time at least fifteen people, including myself, joined George in loud snoring, whereupon he again reproached us with our stupidity. According to his expert knowledge the snoring had had an artificial ring! Finally Ivan summed up the decisions of the conference.

"Three men will try to get out of the camp tomorrow early in the morning. We inside will conceal their absence for as long as we can. One or two or all three of the men may reach the village. They'll deliver the message. Then they'll come back to the camp. We'll organize their getting in all right. All details about getting back again will

be worked out by George and me. I'll take care of the technical side. Agreed?"

I could not agree about one point: why should the men who got out at the risk of their lives return? Why shouldn't they, once they were free, try to escape for good? But both Ivan and George as well as the other "representatives" held the opposite view. The men had to come back so as not to arouse any suspicion. If they escaped, the police would surround the whole district, and the man in Bachkovo would not be able to leave for Sofia to deliver the message. If all three men got out, delivered the message and returned safely, the whole camp might be saved. The health authorities would send doctors and medicine, the sick men would be taken to a hospital, and people in Sofia would know the truth about the camp.

"I propose," George said, "that I should lead the group. I know these mountains well and I know the village too."

"No," objected Ivan, "the three men will be appointed by me. They'll all be from our Workers' Group. We are the most numerous here and the most disciplined."

"Stupid!" argued George. "If we are caught we should be regarded as individuals trying to escape on our own initiative. Otherwise your group or our group will be suspected of organizing something bigger. How many times have I told you that if we want to work together and in groups, we should always make it appear as if we are working individually?"

We realized that George was right.

"You'll choose one man from your group, Ivan," he continued. "I shall go myself, from the Agrarians. Then we need a third man, someone who doesn't belong to any of our groups. What about Michael?"

I received George's suggestion with mixed feelings. I

was thrilled to take part in such an important mission, but could not resign myself to the idea of coming back to the camp. Must I abide by the conference's decision? These thoughts passed like lightning through my mind, and I do not remember how I replied, "Yes, of course," to Ivan's question: "Are you willing to go, Michael?"

"Sorry to wake you up earlier than I said, but you must memorize this before we start." George dangled a piece of paper in front of my face.

"What's the time?" I asked.

"Half past five."

I began reading the note. It was a short letter addressed to a deputy in Sofia. It contained the information that there was typhus in the camp and asked for the necessary steps to be taken. It was signed by five of the most important politicians in the camp.

"If you are caught they must find no document on you. You'll deliver the message but no letter. Hurry up, because I have something else to give you," George explained. Then he handed me another slip of paper—a plan of Bachkovo.

"Take a good look at it. That's the man's house, and his name is Slavi Staichev. I've written the password on the back. Don't forget it, or he won't listen to you."

I was word-perfect when the bell rang at six. A beautiful morning. The whole forest around the camp was alive with song. The birds had never given us a lovelier concert. For breakfast I ate hardly anything. When I returned Ivan and George were already waiting for me.

"You'll go to the lavatories in half an hours' time. You'll enter the second one. The third board on the floor to the

right is loose. You'll lift it up and let yourself down through the hole," Ivan said.

I was not exactly enthralled by the prospect but I said nothing.

"You'll stay there for one or two minutes. If you hear nothing you'll proceed upstream along the river. You'll continue in that direction for about a hundred meters. You'll then come to four big pine trees and there you'll turn to the right. Be careful, because this is the most dangerous zone. If necessary go down on your knees and crawl along on your stomach. After another twenty minutes or at most, half an hour, you'll arrive at a little valley. You'll find Marin there."

"Fine." I tried to smile, but my lips felt stiff.

"If a policeman sees you and tells you to stop, stop! Don't try to run away. Tell him you were trying to escape on your own initiative. If you reach Marin safely wait there with him until George comes. That is, unless you hear rifle or revolver shots. In that case you must both proceed toward Bachkovo as quickly as you can. The way to Bachkovo is very simple. Avoid all the main paths and be careful not to speak to anyone in the village. And come back at once. At six in the afternoon, or at half past six at the latest, you must be back at the place where you are now going to meet Marin. One of us will be there to tell you what to do."

"O.K. Has Marin left?"

"Yes," replied Ivan, looking at his watch. "And he'll have reached his destination in ten minutes' time. In twenty minutes' time be at the lavatories. Good luck!"

"Thanks. I shall need it."

"Good luck, Michael," George said. "See you later."

I went out into the yard. I passed the time of day with a friend. I do not remember a single word of what either of us said. The minutes dragged slowly by. Finally the time came and I proceeded toward the lavatories.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *"The Rest is Silence . . ."*

THE third board to the right on the floor was loose and I lifted it up carefully for it was very filthy. Beneath, the stream was flowing peacefully. The lavatories were at the end of the yard: seven separate boxes in a simple wooden hut. The hut was built over the little river that passed near the camp and this provided a solution, although a somewhat crude one, to the drainage problem. I made a great effort to overcome my disgust and to lower myself into the hole under the board. There was a fifteen-foot drop between the lavatory floor and the river. I was lucky to get down comparatively clean.

Several minutes went by. There was no sound, which meant that my disappearance had passed unnoticed and that I could be on my way. I began wading slowly up the little river. Still no noise. I clambered out onto the bank and walked on. Soon I found the three trees we had agreed on. I turned to the right and entered the "most dangerous zone." When I found that I had emerged from it unscathed I felt really proud of myself. At seven I met Marin and we lay down to wait for George.

Marin Bonkin was the youngest member of the Workers' Group. By profession he was, like Hitler, a house painter, but there the resemblance ended. He was a sane good-humored boy. We talked for a while and then we both fell asleep, which was of course the stupidest thing

we could possibly have done. We were exhausted by the fresh air and the unaccustomed exercise. When George's voice roused us from our siesta we felt like two small children caught stealing chocolates.

"Come on," George said. "There's no time to lose."

We started walking downhill along the river bed. It was one of those little mountain streams that are dry almost all the year round and it made a steep, difficult path. We walked as fast as we could but unfortunately that wasn't very fast. It was so steep that at times we had to lie on our stomachs and crawl from stone to stone.

I glanced at Marin. He looked worn out and I suppose I looked the same. The sweat was trickling down my forehead and smarting in my eyes. We had walked for over three hours without any break and even now George would not hear of our having a rest.

We walked on in silence until we came to a wide road, the road to the near-by monastery. A stream of peasants in their Sunday best were on their way to church. I hadn't realized that it was Sunday. In the camp one lost all count of time; there were no red-letter days in our calendar of monotony. We branched off into the wood to the left.

"Here we are," George said finally. I looked ahead and saw that the wood was coming to an end. There was the village at last—separate cottages no bigger than mountain huts merging into a cluster of bigger houses. This was Bachkovo.

We followed the plan and stuck to the side streets. I could sniff Sunday in the air and by the time we reached the house we had passed only two old peasants. We recognized the house at once; the description I had learned by heart that morning had been very accurate. George

knocked at the door. It was opened by a wizened little woman, her face crumpled into a thousand wrinkles. She peered at us suspiciously.

"What do you want?"

George told her.

"He isn't here," she replied and was about to shut the door in our faces without more ado.

"I am from the village of Simeon," I whispered. "Tell him that. And tell him that we have a message for him from his sister."

"But he has no sister," the woman objected. "I am his mother."

The key words were working! This was the reply we had been waiting for.

"Good," I replied, feeling for all the world like a character in a third-rate spy story. "Then will you tell him that Ignat has got married and sends greetings."

The old woman beckoned to us to come in. We entered a small narrow corridor and she ushered us into the living room.

She soon came back carrying three plates of bread and vegetables decorated with a few fragments of home-cured ham. The saliva gushed into my mouth and I realized that I was famished.

We were still munching busily when the old woman's son entered. He seemed to recognize George and Marin from earlier days and greeted us all with friendly warmth.

"How did you escape?" he asked.

"We haven't," George answered.

"What do you mean?"

In short clipped sentences George explained our plan and concluded: "Your job is to get someone absolutely trustworthy to deliver our message in Sofia."

"I'll go myself tonight," the man promised. "But look here, you can't go back to the camp. It's too late. We can hide you in the village for the time being."

George looked at his watch. "We're leaving now," he said.

"It's sheer madness. You can't possibly do it."

George paid not the slightest attention to the man. "Can you let us have a few lumps of sugar?" he asked.

"I can't let you go." The man was almost tearful. "You'll only be killed."

"Don't be a sentimental idiot." George pocketed the sugar. "So long."

The man shrugged his shoulders and looked pityingly at Marin and me. I looked away. I was only too ready to be convinced by his arguments. The old woman whispered, "God bless you," and we went out.

We soon left the village behind us and it took us only half an hour from there to the hills. George ran the whole way and we panted in his wake.

The first two hours' climbing were all right. George was worried by the lateness of the hour and discarded the safety measures he had taken on the way down. The three of us remained together. I was amazed by his energy. He was much older than either Marin or I and yet he seemed tireless, whereas we were both utterly exhausted. It must have been about four when I said: "Let's stop for a minute or two. I can't go on like this."

Marin looked at me gratefully and lay down on the ground. I sat down too. George, glowering, handed us a lump of sugar each. "All right, you can have five minutes."

He remained standing and did not take his eyes off his watch. "Time's up!"

We obeyed automatically. George egged us on, urging us to hurry. But Marin and I fell behind and the gap between us and George was widening every minute. The path was becoming more difficult too. We had to climb over great boulders and crawl through bushes on our hands and knees. I felt a pain as sharp as toothache in my legs and my heart was beating like a hammer against my chest. I persevered for as long as I could but finally I stopped, leaned against a tree trunk and said querulously:

"I can't and don't propose to walk another step."

Marin sank on to the ground and screamed:

"Nor shall I! We're too late anyway. It's nearly five."

I expected George to lose his temper but he pointed out quite calmly that there were only another two hours to go. This irritated me to madness and I exploded.

"You can go on if you want to. I absolutely refuse to. I'm free and I shall do as I please!"

"Really?" George's voice was gentle. He walked toward me and slapped my face hard. The unexpected blow upset my balance. I lurched back and hit my head violently against the tree. Wild with rage and pain I flung myself at him, but he was too quick for me and I fell flat on my back. I was still dazed from the fall when I heard him warn Marin:

"The same thing's in store for you if you happen to feel like following his example."

I looked at George. His face was, as usual, expressionless but his eyes smoldered with anger. He did not raise his voice.

"Get up, Michael."

I obeyed.

"Go on ahead. Marin will follow you."

Without turning back I knew that Marin too had obeyed. We walked on.

We managed to get back in time. Ivan's men were waiting for us, as he had promised they would, and they brought us back to the camp before the last six-thirty roll call.

In spite of the epidemic the Chief soon revised his orders and we were sent out again to our road making, guarded by policemen who were careful to keep a healthy distance away from us. A week after our excursion I was at work on the road with George and Ivan. We were feeling pretty gloomy. In the last twenty-four hours seven men had been strapped onto mules and sent to the hospital. Our doctors doubted whether they would survive the journey. There were a dozen others still in the dormitories prostrate with high fever. Ivan tried to cheer us and himself up.

"If the message has got through something's bound to happen within the next few days."

George nodded. "Well, anyway, we did our best."

"You certainly did." Ivan turned to me. "By the way, Michael, you still haven't told me how your little trip went off?"

I looked at George and felt myself blush.

"It was just a joy ride," he said carelessly.

"I know you're hiding something from me," Ivan protested. "Even Marin, who always tells me everything, looked uncomfortable and stammered like a schoolboy when I asked him about the village and how he got there."

George laughed. "What does it matter? We delivered the message. The rest is silence."

Ivan was obviously offended and walked away. I plucked up my courage and said: "Thank you."

"What for?" George asked.

"For 'the rest is silence.' "

"You should thank Shakespeare for that."

I laughed uncomfortably. And the rest *was* silence. George never told anyone the details of our "little trip."

## CHAPTER XV

### *What a Story!*

ONE afternoon, three days later, all work on the road was stopped. We were urgently recalled to the camp. But on arrival there nobody was allowed to enter the buildings. We remained outside, gathered in groups near the house of the Police Chief. All of us were rather nervous. A horseman had arrived from the town and was conferring with the Police Chief in his room. This was bad news, for we knew that the horseman usually brought lists of names with them—names of people to be taken to the military courts.

Soon a policeman was called to the Chief's room. He was away only a minute. When he came back everybody stared at him. . . . Where was he going? He approached our group and singled out George. George grew pale, but still had time to crack a joke. "Didn't I tell you they would free me first?" Nobody felt like laughing. The policeman took George off to our building, and we were told that we would be forbidden to talk to him any more. This was a new procedure: anyone who was ordered to leave the camp had to be completely isolated from his fellow prisoners. After George they picked out three "Reds." Then two "colorless" men, followed by two Macedonians. Finally the policeman came up to me. I could hardly breathe as I followed him into the building. I packed my belongings quickly and then managed to ask:

"Where are we going?"

He was a friendly policeman, and he replied: "No idea. An urgent order has arrived. Sixteen people are going down."

Within the next hour each of us, one by one, passed through "purgatory"—a room in the policeman's building where seven policemen examined us to prevent us from smuggling anything out of the camp. We were, of course, again undressed and every single object in our belongings was most carefully searched. Finally we were ready.

We were given an escort of twenty-five policemen with the usual rifles and bayonets. The rifles were loaded in front of us, with the warning that the police had instructions to shoot immediately at any sign of disobedience. Nobody paid much attention to the policemen, however. We were all too excited about the departure itself. Where were we going? Prison? Another camp? The Military Courts? I myself strangely enough did not like the idea of leaving the camp. The nightmare of the Sofia Police Building was still fresh in my mind. I was really sorry, too, at having to leave most of my best friends behind me. From the group in our dormitory there was only George. But even he was depressed. "I don't like the idea, boys," he said as we were leaving. "I simply don't like it! I don't know why, but I don't want to leave the camp."

Going down the mountains was easy. Gradually we forgot our worries and someone even began to sing. The policemen, bored by the long journey, became more and more friendly and joined in the singing. After we had walked for about four hours we emerged from the woods. The town of Assenovgrad lay before us. Instinctively everybody began walking faster. The town was drawing us like a huge magnet. A simple, ordinary Bulgarian pro-

vincial town, little more than a village—it was for us something mysterious, fascinating, a link with the outside world. For months and months we had seen nothing but our own unshaven faces and the forests round the camp. Now we felt we were back in the midst of civilization. And when George shouted: "A car! A car!" all of us turned, electrified, toward the road. Yes, a car was passing not more than a hundred yards away. A two-seater Ford, driven by a soldier. I doubt whether visitors to Paris have ever looked at the pictures in the Louvre with greater interest. A car! A real car! We were fascinated.

"You looked at that car as a donkey looks at a train," George mocked. "Haven't you ever seen a car before? After all . . ."

As though aroused from a dream we walked on, and soon we entered the town itself.

"A woman!"

This was more exciting even than the car. A woman! She was coming toward us and we saw how uneasy she felt with all our eyes on her. She disappeared into a house immediately, and George of course became angry with us.

"You look so terrible," he said. "You frightened the poor creature!" We looked at each other. Yes, George was right. Our shabby clothes gave us the appearance of bandits. Sunburned, unshaven, each carrying either a blanket or a bag, we must have been a dreadful sight. Soon half a dozen children gathered around us. The policemen, of course, kept everyone away, but our convoy consisting of sixteen men and twenty-five armed policemen was quite impressive, and the nearer we drew to the center of the town, the bigger the crowd around us became.

"Germans!"

It was George again—that man always saw everything

first. A group of German soldiers, eight in all, coming toward us from a side street. I gazed at them. Here they were—young, good-looking, well dressed and obviously well fed. In Assenovgrad! What on earth were they doing in this remote provincial Bulgarian town, so far away from the outside world? What were they doing over the whole of Europe, from Narvik to Sicily, from Bordeaux to Odessa? Germans! The Bulgarian peasant calls them locusts. What a good name! Like locusts, they go everywhere and eat everything!

Finally we reached the Police Station. We were lined up in the yard. Roll call. Then the Beast came. We looked at him with disgust but in silence; we had decided beforehand not to speak to him. He felt talkative, however, and made a speech about how merciless he would be to anyone who tried to escape or who made a nuisance of himself. He had the power to act on the spot.

"Has anyone anything to say?" he asked. Still we remained silent. "Don't you want to know where you are going?" he asked again. We were dying to know but nobody said a word. The Beast became furious; our "passive resistance" was very effective.

His face flushed and he shouted hysterically: "Swine! Spies! Traitors! Why on earth didn't they shoot you long ago? Idiots!"

Still no reply. Wild with rage, he went away.

In about half an hour we were given a new escort, this time about fifty policemen, who surrounded us on all sides. In this formation we were driven out to the street. George made another joke—about our importance. "The greatest gangsters and assassins," he said, "have only two guards each as an escort when driven through the streets." We

had three! Soon we discovered that the whole group was going out of the town. Our hearts sank. I knew well what this might mean—"shot while trying to escape." Even George said gloomily: "Say your prayers, boys . . . that is, if you remember any. . . ."

So this may be the end, I thought. And, strangely enough, I thought of nothing but the camp and the people whom we had left behind us there. Would they follow us soon? We were outside the town now. No one spoke. A terrible feeling of depression submerged me. We all looked at the policemen and their rifles, suspicious of every movement they made. George was walking next to me. It was a wonderful summer evening. If it were to be our last, Nature was doing us proud. Behind the mountains ahead of us the sun had set and darkness was beginning to fall over the valley. The sky was light blue and clear of any clouds.

We continued walking for about half an hour before we reached a big building with a huge garden on the right-hand side of the road. "Assenovgrad State Hospital" was the inscription on the top of the gate. We were bewildered. A hospital? Why? "This is a lunatic asylum, boys," George said again. "Cheer up! We shall have a grand time."

"Why can't you be serious for once, George?" I interrupted him.

"Because I am too serious," he said pointlessly, and we all laughed for no reason.

Together with some of our guards we were taken straight into the house, while the rest surrounded the building. Then we waited for about an hour. Nobody seemed to understand anything. We were so astonished, so curious and so nervous that we forgot we had had

nothing to eat since lunchtime. What did all this mean?

Suddenly a queer-looking individual—small, fat, ugly, with frightened eyes and a high-pitched voice—entered the room. He was the assistant doctor, he said. He was sorry, he went on, dinner was not yet ready, but nobody had told him that sixteen people were coming. He had expected five patients only. So would we mind having a bath first, and then dinner? The bath was compulsory, according to the regulations. There was plenty of hot water and one of the servants would help us. The beds were ready too. He would come again later. Would we begin with the bath? Were we really mad? I thought. I could not listen any more and seized the assistant doctor by the shoulder.

"Look here," I said. "Stop this nonsense, will you? What is it all about? What bath and what dinner? Who are you and where are we? What are you going to do with us? We refuse to leave this room unless you explain!"

Everyone's nerves were on edge and within the next few seconds we had surrounded the poor man, shouting: "We refuse to leave the room!" Then, of course, the policemen who were present in the room dragged us back to our places, cursing and beating us. "Silence!" they shouted. "Or we'll shoot! You are to obey the doctor and do whatever he tells you."

There was no choice. But we were still scared of the bath idea. Most of us had passed through the Sofia Police Building and knew what it meant to be stripped. We begged to be allowed to enter "the bathroom" in groups of two, not one by one. Why we were so insistent about this I do not know. It is a strange crowd psychology that draws people together when they scent danger. The assist-

ant doctor said he had no objection to our entering the bathroom in groups of ten, if we so desired!

George and I were the first to pass through the bathroom ordeal and the others wished us luck. It was agreed that, if we were not back in half an hour's time, they would refuse to have a bath. And they gave us a really hearty send-off.

From the corridor outside the room where we were waiting we climbed a stone staircase to the second floor of the building. Everything was white and clean. We could hardly believe our eyes. The assistant doctor led us down a long narrow corridor with several rooms opening off on each side of it. "These two rooms are to be your bedrooms," he said. "Five will sleep here and nine in the other one." We opened the doors with great curiosity. Clean beds, clean sheets! Tables! Cupboards! "And this is the bathroom," the man continued. A modern bathroom. A shining clean washbasin and a shower. "There is plenty of time; don't hurry. You must undress here. All your clothes have to be taken away. We'll give you special clothes while you are here, in accordance with the regulation."

This was really too much and even George lost his temper. "Look here, Doctor. You had better tell us right now what all this means. We aren't children!"

The man, contrary to my expectations, looked very pleased. George had called him "Doctor," and since he was not a doctor, this was the greatest possible flattery. He was a stupid man, and in several minutes told us everything! There had been a great scandal in Sofia about the typhus epidemic in the camp. The Ministry of Health had raised hell and the police had therefore decided to take measures. Several people from the camp, alleged to be ill,

were scheduled to be taken to the hospital and looked after there. A special committee of doctors from Sofia would come to Assenovgrad to ascertain that this had been done. The police chief of the town (the Beast) had told the assistant doctor to prepare five beds, but sixteen people had come! And fifty policemen! How was he to feed them? He wished this crisis had not arisen. But the police chief had telephoned again in the evening and had warned him to be careful. He repeated that he would send him to the camp for two years if he did not follow the instructions. And the instructions were very strict—the doctors' committee was coming tomorrow, the "patients" had to be in bed, and nobody had to know anything.

The mystery was solved—obviously our letters had reached their destination. All this was good news!

We had a first-rate dinner after the bath, and when we went to bed later—to real beds with white sheets—we decided that life was beautiful again. There was nothing to complain of.

During the night, of course, George and I discussed the most important problem—the possibilities of escape. Our beds were side by side and we spoke in whispers. We realized that the chances were very slight. We counted six policemen under our three windows and six others farther away in the garden. The whole building was surrounded. In the building, in the corridor outside our door, four more policemen were always on duty. There were a dozen or so downstairs in the hall. But the greatest disadvantage of all was that we had no clothes. They had given us hospital pajamas and a sort of hospital dressing gown, which were to be our uniform by day and by night. Escape was only possible with help from outside. But we

were too tired to think of that. "Tomorrow!" whispered George, and went to sleep. So did I, almost at once, and I slept like a newborn child that night, in a real bed, with pajamas and white sheets for the first time in months.

The next morning at eight o'clock the special committee of doctors arrived, accompanied by the Beast, who warned us that we were not to speak to the other "visitors," and that we might only tell them how we felt physically. Everybody said "Yes," but when the doctors came we told them all we wanted, in accordance with a plan carefully worked out beforehand. The Beast was furious but he could not kick the doctors out of the room, and they stayed for over an hour. The plan—George's plan, needless to say—worked admirably. Each of us told them different facts, which fitted together would make a real picture of the camp conditions.

I was glad that we had decided not to complain about anything personal; we simply spoke about the general conditions in the camp. This—again George's idea—was the best way of dealing with such matters. Had we spoken as individuals the doctors would, perhaps, have reported individual cases to Sofia, and then there would have been no results. Only if the particular person had influential friends would his case have had any chance of being considered. Speaking as a group for the whole camp and describing the whole camp system in general, we had more chance of being listened to and of having some of our complaints remedied. As a matter of fact I was able to ascertain some months later that this conversation with the doctors did bear fruit, and the conditions in the camp were improved as a result of it.

The rest of the morning was uneventful.

The afternoon, however, was sensational.

We were allowed to walk for two hours in the hospital grounds. Across the road, not more than a hundred yards away, we saw a small house which might have been a local inn. There was nothing unusual about the building—an ordinary one-story peasant house—but we could hardly believe our eyes when we first saw the inmates. Five or six women, young, attractive, smartly dressed and plastered with make-up. Of course, this time too, George saw them first. "Look at those strange birds," he said. Two of them were walking along the road quite near the hospital. They wore white summer dresses, sandals and no stockings, and were both very sunburned. They might have stepped out of a fashionable seaside resort. Both women were very good-looking and it was obvious that they were foreigners. What could this mean? We were dying of curiosity, and I could not help asking one of the policemen who they were.

He smiled and said simply:

"Oh, they are the Bucharest women! They have been here for more than four months now. For the German officers!"

Had a bomb exploded in the hospital we could not have been more surprised. Within the next few minutes the policemen supplied us with all the details. About five miles away from the town was situated one of the biggest German military airports in the Balkans. When the Lufftwaffe officers arrived they brought with them in their planes twenty prostitutes from Bucharest (the whole German army that came to Bulgaria came from Rumania). The German spirit of organization at its best! The town, however—a small provincial town with very conservative traditions—was shocked, and the mayor protested to the

German military authorities. The women were drawing too much attention to themselves and the whole affair produced a very bad impression. So the Germans removed the women to several houses outside the town. One of the houses was this inn near our hospital.

"What a story!" I thought, with my journalistic instinct. What a headline! Twenty women brought by air from Bucharest to this remote Bulgarian town for the pleasure of their excellencies, the German officers! The New Order! It sounded like a story from *The Arabian Nights*. But facts were facts. There they were, the women, in front of us! We could see their figures and their faces and could even sometimes hear echoes of their laughter. Later in the afternoon we saw several German army cars bringing the officers coming to visit them. Simple, practical, wonderfully organized. What a story!

The women across the road completely upset the peaceful atmosphere of the hospital. We became very excited. It was the normal instinct of a dozen men who for months and months had not even seen a picture of a woman. George was the most restless.

"Look here, boys," he said mysteriously. "The whole problem is that of transport. There they are across the road. Here are we in the hospital. I have a plan. Give me full powers and ask no questions!"

"Granted!" shouted everyone. George's ability for organizing things was amazing. That same day he had already arranged, through a channel of his own, to receive newspapers secretly. He also had a plan for sending letters to Sofia. As for the house across the road, he succeeded in establishing contact the very next day. Of course he kept it all to himself. His principle was that if one person knew

something, that meant that only one person was in the know. If two persons knew it, that meant that eleven people knew it; for three, his figure was one hundred and eleven; and if four people knew a fact, that meant according to George's calculations that one thousand one hundred and eleven knew it. . . .

Among all of us in the hospital I was the only one who knew what George's system had been. Through the janitor of the hospital he got in touch with the cook, through the cook with the gardener and through him with the waiter of an inn near the hospital. The waiter also served drinks at the house across the road. Through him George sent a message to the "ladies." In the evening the waiter reported that all was well and that two women were willing to come at any time to the hospital. The financial question was also settled after long negotiations between George and the waiter. Only the transport problem remained but even this George solved in several hours. The women were to enter the hospital in the evening in the hospital truck, which was never inspected by the policemen guarding the building. The driver of the truck was, of course, on friendly terms with George. Then the cook had to open the kitchen for the strange visitors; there were no policemen there. And . . . "Once they are in the building," George said, "there will be no further obstacles!" The visitors were expected at about 10:00 P.M. after dinner. After informing us of the arrangement George said suddenly: "Well, do you want them to come tonight or tomorrow?"

"Tonight, tonight!" several people shouted. "Who knows what tomorrow may bring? They may send us back to the camp. They may bump us off! Tonight! Tonight!"

Tonight! This was the wish of the majority. Tonight! The nontomorrow complex. Tomorrow is unknown. Tomorrow may be prison. Tomorrow may be torture. Tomorrow may be death. Yes, death, for you had only to stick your head out of the window to get a bullet through it. No, definitely, there was no tomorrow! There was only today! Tonight!

And it was tonight. . . .

The next morning while we were walking in the garden the waiter from the inn got in touch with George through the janitor and told him that he wanted to see him at once. George was quite surprised and went to meet him secretly in the kitchen. We were waiting impatiently to find out the reason for this mysterious visit. George came back in about half an hour's time.

"I have never been so astonished in all my life," he declared, quite agitated. This was abnormal, for George was by nature one of the calmest people I have ever met. I had never seen him excited. "It's fantastic," he continued. "Haven't I often told you that things happen in real life which no imagination could possibly conceive? Unbelievable!"

"What is it?" we prompted him.

"Why, the waiter came and brought me back all the money. The women refused to take money from us when they heard we were political prisoners. They, too, are anti-German! They were brought here by force, and are not allowed to go back to Rumania. They hate the Germans as much as we do, they said! It's fantastic!"

We were amazed and could not utter a word. George laughed and continued: "Hitler has lost the war, boys. He cannot win when he is surrounded by hate on all sides.

Even the prostitutes he supplies for his officers work against him!"

What a story! I thought. Two women, two ordinary street women in whom one had no reason to expect honor or dignity, two women who sold their bodies for money, two prostitutes had cast their vote against Hitler!

What a story!

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Robin Hood or Quisling?*

“OH HELLO, how are you?”

“All right, thanks.”

“I’m so glad to see you back again. When did they free you?”

“A couple of days ago.”

“The bastards! Tell me, what was it like?”

“It was all right. . . . As a matter of fact I quite enjoyed it.”

“Don’t try to be funny.”

“I couldn’t be more serious.”

“How long did you stay?”

“Four months.”

“Four months! That’s a long time, isn’t it, for a concentration camp?”

“Is it?”

“For God’s sake stop joking. And tell me what the conditions were really like. I’m longing to hear. Let’s begin at the beginning. What time did you have to get up in the morning?”

“At nine.”

“At *nine*?”

“Yes. Then we went and bathed.”

“Bathed?”

“Yes, in the swimming pool. And what a swimming pool! Like a Hollywood film star’s. Gave us an appetite for breakfast.”

"Not much of a breakfast, I suppose."

"On the contrary. Hot chocolate, bread, butter, jam. And eggs if you felt like it—fried or scrambled."

"You're pulling my leg."

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Well, I can see you'd rather not talk about it."

"You're quite mistaken. I'm prepared to tell you anything you care to listen to."

"What did you have for lunch?"

"Lunch? Let me see. There was usually soup to begin with."

"What do you mean—'begin'? Surely you didn't have anything after that?"

"Certainly we did. Fish and meat."

"You'll be telling me they gave you dessert next!"

"Of course they did. Compote or fresh fruit and coffee."

"But that's impossible. There isn't a grain of coffee in the whole country."

"There was in our camp."

"All right, there was. What did you do about smoking?"

"We each had thirty cigarettes distributed to us every morning."

"And what about work?"

"Work?"

"Work, compulsory work. Surely they obliged you to work."

"Good Lord, no! It was all voluntary. If one liked one could potter about a bit in the garden, digging around and watering plants and things. But we could please ourselves."

"I don't understand why you've chosen to make fun of

me. I only wanted to know the truth about the conditions in the camp. One can never tell these days. For all I know I may be sent there too."

"If you are I advise you to take your skis. The camp is right up a mountain and there are plenty of nice runs down."

"Come now, you really are going too far. By the way, you know Nicola Genov, don't you?"

"Yes indeed, rather."

"Wasn't he in the camp with you?"

"As a matter of fact we slept in the same room."

"Well, I saw him the other day and he told me quite a different story."

"Not really? What did he tell you?"

"That you worked like niggers for nine hours a day. That you had next to nothing to eat."

"You're pulling my leg."

"That you weren't allowed to smoke."

"What?"

"And that they beat you."

"That's really going too far."

"Well then, how do you account for it?"

"For what?"

"The difference between his story and yours?"

"Ah, but Genov was sent back to the camp yesterday, wasn't he?"

This was the story with which George and I regaled anyone who displayed curiosity about our experiences in the camp. The conditions of our release had made us wary. It was quite unexpected. Three days before the German attack on Russia we were taken from the hospital to the Police Prison of Assenovgrad. There we were inter-

viewed by the director of police in person, each of us separately, and informed that the Cabinet had graciously decided to free thirty-six prisoners . . . conditionally. I asked for a definition of the word "conditionally."

We were to be allowed to live in our own homes in Sofia but without our identification papers, which remained with the police. We were free to go out by day but not after dark. Any contacts with opposition politicians were strictly forbidden. We might travel only by special permission of the police. Above all we were not to discuss political matters nor to describe to anyone, even to the highest Government officials, the actual conditions in the camp.

This merely meant that they were releasing us in order to have time and opportunity to cook up some heavier charges against us. But strangely enough it was Hitler who saved us. Or rather his attack on Russia. During the weeks that followed June 22 the police confined their persecutions to extreme Left-Wing elements. Four big school buildings in Sofia were taken over and transformed into temporary prisons. In July alone ten thousand people were arrested in Sofia and probably it will never be known how many of them were killed.

George suggested we should take advantage of this purge to "disappear" and I agreed. Our plan was to make our way to Salonika and from there to southern Greece, where George had friends who would help him to escape to Turkey. "First we'll have a look at Macedonia," he said. "It ought to be interesting."

George and I left Sofia at the end of June and we spent one month in Macedonia on the Aegean coast. We went as far east as the Maritsa river but it was closely guarded by German troops and we had to turn back. George re-

turned to Sofia and I followed him two days later. When I arrived there and went to his flat, his wife told me that he had been rearrested a few hours earlier.

Our trip to Macedonia and the Aegean was one of the most interesting experiences I have ever had. We traveled (in disguise of course) with a group of Bulgarian doctors and nurses who had been sent to organize welfare centers in Bitolje (Monastir). George's brother, who was later arrested and sentenced to death, was the driver of one of the ambulances and he took us on as his "assistants."

On the road to the Vardar valley we passed several Yugoslav military cemeteries along which a forlorn fence of wrecked and disabled German tanks still stood. They had not yet been cleared away. The German tank columns had advanced westward along this road and on the second day of the war they had captured all the strong points in Macedonia. Meanwhile the Yugoslav troops, entrenched along the Yugoslav-Bulgarian frontier, in concrete dugouts and behind pillboxes, waited for the Germans to attack them. But the Germans never did. They crossed to Yugoslavia along the only three roads that lead into Macedonia and left the Yugoslav frontier fortifications behind them. Weeks after the capitulation of the Yugoslav armies, Yugoslav officers and men still hung onto their frontier posts, not knowing or not believing that the Germans were already in Belgrade. The bulk of the Yugoslav armies massed there to repulse the German advance never had the chance to fight. They never saw the Germans.

Once we reached Macedonia, what struck us most was the ease and zest with which the Macedonian underground movement battled against the Bulgarian occupying au-

thorities. There was a curfew in Skoplje at seven in the evening. George and I stayed there a week and not a night went by without fighting in the streets. It was the same in Bitolje which the Bulgarian nationalists claim as "the most Bulgarian of all Macedonian towns." We found the people there as anti-Bulgarian as they are everywhere in Macedonia. They had organized several groups which at intervals retired into the mountains for "training."\* They were extremely well organized and in contact with all the guerrillas in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Greece. In July 1941, while we were in Skoplje, the Bulgarian court-martial sentenced to death twenty-six soldiers from the Bulgarian army of occupation who had given their arms and ammunition to these guerrillas!

Later, in 1942, when I escaped from the Balkan terror land and wanted to publish some information about these guerrillas who—especially in Slovenia, Croatia and western Serbia—are by far the strongest in Yugoslavia, various friends of mine concluded that I was the victim of delusions. When I endeavored to explain to them that those Yugoslav guerrillas who are not supporters of Mihailovic have an army more powerful and more active than his, it was suspected that I was merely trying to make Communist propaganda. Now in 1943 the role the Partizans are playing is measured more accurately by the British and American press.

A friend of mine, a Serb from Belgrade who escaped from Yugoslavia during the winter of 1942, had the same experience. He too was branded as "Red." "Then," he said to me, "they tried to prove that in Yugoslavia only Mihailovic was resisting, and that the Partizans were ban-

\* See Chapter 23.

dits. Mihailovic was Robin Hood. I told them I had friends both among the Partizans and in the Mihailovic forces, and that though both fight the Nazis the Partizans were in the majority. I was duly informed that I was a Communist. This was in 1942. Today many people say that only the Partizans count. Mihailovic is described as a quisling. When I try to explain that this is not true and that he counts for a great deal I am proclaimed a Fascist."

This, unfortunately, is the situation. Colonel Mihailovic, to whom the exiled Yugoslav Government in London rightly awarded the rank of general and wrongly the status of war minister, undoubtedly has fought and undoubtedly is fighting well in the mountains of Yugoslavia. But he is an officer in the Royal Yugoslav Army and a nationalist possessed of what one British weekly described as the "narrow Serb attitude." The Partizans, on the other hand, are scattered throughout the country and are neither nationalistic nor narrow in their attitude. They are federalists and are strong in the spiritual armament provided by their ideal, the ideal of social justice and brotherhood in the Balkans. That ideal is misnamed "Communism" by prejudice in Britain and America. It is high time that we should understand what this so-called Communism amounts to, and then, and then *only*, we will approach Balkan problems from the right angle.

## CHAPTER XVII

### *Only Moscow Knows*

WHEN George and I arrived in Skoplje, the central city of Northern Macedonia, in the last days of June 1941, the situation was still obscure. The Bulgarian authorities had many problems to contend with, and no authorities who obey the dictates of nationalism, whether they receive instructions from Sofia, Athens or Belgrade, can ever solve the Macedonian problem.

Macedonia is a geographical and economic unit. It is not, never has been and never will be a national unit. Until 1913 Macedonia was under Turkish rule and then it was divided among Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria. Since 1919 the situation has remained virtually unchanged except that Bulgaria has lost a few morsels of her portion to Yugoslavia.

Macedonia is inhabited by Albanians, Greeks, Rumanians (Cutzo-Vlachs), Slavs and Turks. No one national group is in the majority. In western and central (Serbian) Macedonia the population is predominantly Slav and speaks the Macedonian dialect—a Slav tongue akin to both Bulgarian and Serbian. Sofia nationalists maintain that Macedonian is a dialect of Bulgarian, whereas Belgrade nationalists are equally convinced that it is a dialect of Serbian. It is highly improbable that these linguists will ever split their differences. In fact the Macedonian Slavs are, by origin and language, "a separate race akin to both

Serbs and Bulgarians but identical with neither," as H. D. Harrison says.\* They are Macedonians!

George and I drew this same conclusion from our various encounters with the local population. The Macedonians have no desire to be identified with either Bulgarians or Serbs; above all they wish to be left in peace and not to be "liberated" by anyone. It is true that within the ranks of the Yugoslav army they did not fight the Germans as they should have fought them, as the Serbs fought them. The Macedonians—and the Croats too—did not fight because they did not feel that the war was their war. It seemed an alien war and they did not realize that the danger threatening Yugoslavia threatened them too.

For over twenty years Belgrade nationalists have tried to prove that Macedonia does not exist. They christened it South Serbia; only Serbian was taught in the schools and only books approved by Belgrade were allowed to circulate. Since 1941 the Bulgarian authorities have done likewise and any language except Bulgarian is taboo, both in former "South Serbia" and in southeastern Macedonia which, before the war, was under Greek rule. During that period the Slav inhabitants were informed that they were not Slavs, but merely "Slav-speaking." If once they were taught to speak Greek they would automatically become one-hundred-percent Greek.

Only the Turks, who ruled Macedonia for more than five centuries and who in many districts form the majority of the population, have never claimed that the Macedonians are Turks. In fact the "cruel" and "insupportable" Turkish domination of the Balkans was infinitely more tolerant and benevolent than that of the different Balkan nationalist governments. No Turkish Sultan ever massa-

\* H. D. Harrison, *The Soul of Yugoslavia*, London, 1941.

cred the Bulgarians as King Boris of Bulgaria did in 1923. No Turkish governor was ever so cruel as the successive Balkan "liberators" of the unhappy Macedonian people.

The Macedonians do not want to be liberated. The most sensible Macedonian leaders realized this soon after the last war. They revived the principle once proclaimed by Gladstone—"Macedonia for the Macedonians." Their aim was that Macedonia should be united and alone, freed from the risks of any further "liberation," an autonomous unit in a greater Balkan federation. Thus the fact that Macedonia is inhabited by so many nationalities would not prove an obstacle but an encouragement to wider Balkan unity.

I remember the explanation given to me by one of the first leaders of the Macedonian federalists, now an outlaw somewhere in Macedonia who has joined the fight against Boris' Bulgarian police. He spoke Turkish, Albanian, Greek and Macedonian equally well and jokingly said that he was by nationality a Greco-Serbo-Bulgaro-Albano-Turk! He loved his Macedonia and his Macedonians, no matter whether they spoke Turkish, Albanian, Greek or Slav, and he hated all nationalists and would-be "liberators" of his country with a burning hatred. I asked this federalist why he was such an admirer of Moscow. In a few words he gave me the clue to the "insoluble" Macedonian problem.

"We want to live in peace," he said. "We want to speak freely the language of our fathers, whether it be Greek, Albanian, Turkish or Serbo-Bulgarian. We want to go as we please to churches or to mosques. We were happy under the Turks, happy until the nationalists from Sofia, Athens and Belgrade began to 'liberate' us. Now we are unhappy. In Sofia we are condemned as Serbian or Greek

agents and killed. In Belgrade they proclaim us Bulgarian agents. And in Athens, Serbian or Bulgarian. They all want us to belong to them, but we belong only to ourselves. Western Europe does not understand our position and dismisses us as Communists, for the Balkan nationalists who fight over us are united in that only—in portraying us as dangerous Communists. The different Balkan police forces, although at daggers drawn, exchange information about our 'Communistic' activities and help one another persecute us. No wonder there is only one road still open to us—the road to Moscow. There and there only Macedonians can work together. In the Third International, Macedonians of Albanian, Greek and Slav origin work in harmony together, for Moscow alone is firm and frank in its support of Balkan federation—the only solution that can bring peace and social justice to the Balkans. Moscow is alone in understanding that. . . ."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *"Long Live Yugoslavia"*

"THERE is another urgent question, sir."

"What is it?"

"Valkov's death sentence."

The general pushed back his chair and began to walk up and down the room. He glared at the captain standing at attention beside his desk and asked:

"Why hasn't he been executed yet?"

"I don't know, sir. The previous War Minister . . ."

"Shut up!" the general barked. "I am not interested in what the previous War Minister has done or not done. Who is War Minister now?"

"I only wanted . . ."

"Do you mind telling me who is War Minister now?"

"You, sir."

"Prepare an order for Valkov's execution at once."

"Yes, sir."

"In which prison is he?"

"The Sofia Central Prison, sir."

"I want him executed tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir."

In twenty minutes' time the captain brought in a pink slip of paper—all urgent orders of the War Ministry are typed on special pink paper. The general glanced through it. "Since the Committee for the Control of the Court-martials and the Military Courts is completely satisfied

with the decision of the Special Sofia Military Court of February 11, sentencing George Georgiev Valkov to death for high treason, and since the prisoner has not so far shown any signs of repentance nor made any appeal for mercy, I command that his execution take place tomorrow, April 12, 1942."

The general signed and remarked, "We must show no mercy toward traitors."

"No, sir," replied the captain, taking the order out of the room.

Within the next few minutes one of the War Ministry dispatch riders was handed a big envelope addressed to "The Director. Sofia Central Prison." The envelope was marked "by hand" and "urgent." The messenger put it in his bag and started the engine of his motorcycle. It bumped through the slush of the courtyard out into the street. It had rained all night and was still raining. The streets were slippery but he had to hurry, for the message was urgent. Soon he left the main streets behind him and entered the poor quarters of the city, the so-called "Three Wells" quarter. The streets were unpaved, muddy and smelly. The motorcycle splashed through wide puddles of water. When at last the messenger sighted the big gray walls of the Central Prison he was wet and dirty. Even his goggles were streaked with mud. He wanted to park his motorcycle at the main entrance, but it was jammed with a big crowd of people, mostly women. The messenger thought: Why on earth are they waiting outside in the rain? "Get out of the way!" he shouted, and the crowd, to his astonishment, obediently broke into two groups and made way for him. The two sentries at the door saluted. He took off his gloves, which were soaked through, and said:

"An urgent message from the War Ministry. Have to deliver it by hand to the Director."

"Right!"

The big iron door of the prison swung open and swallowed up the messenger.

The crowd outside gathered in one group. Those who were nearest to the door had heard the messenger's words and passed them on to those behind. Soon everyone in the crowd was whispering excitedly.

"Perhaps there's an amnesty for Easter," an old woman suggested.

"Even if there were, it wouldn't come from the War Ministry, but from the Ministry of Justice," replied a young boy who was obviously well versed in such matters. . . . "Either they want some prisoners for the Military Courts, or else it's an order for execution. They usually . . ."

He did not finish his sentence. The woman beside him clutched his arm, and then with a little sigh she sank to the ground. The basket which she was carrying fell, too, and its contents were scattered in the mud—cigarettes, several pairs of socks, two shirts, one dark blue pullover and some packages of food—the usual parcel which almost every visitor to the prison had with him that afternoon. For it was Thursday afternoon, the only afternoon in the week when the prisoners' relatives are allowed to come and bring them parcels of food and clothes.

The young boy and two other men leaned over the woman to pick her up. Her dress was splashed with mud. Her hat had fallen off and the rain was dripping onto her pale face. It was a pretty face, but worry and exhaustion had left their traces on it. A small bottle of brandy was produced from somewhere. They made her sip it, and a

woman began rubbing her forehead. Others, who had not seen what had happened, were asking: "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. A woman's fainted."

"Couldn't they get her in? If we told the sentries she's fainted perhaps they . . ."

"Not a hope. It's not the first time this has happened. Someone always passes out when we wait here. . . ."

Hans Adolf Beckerle had every reason to be satisfied with himself. Two years earlier he had been a mere local police director in Frankfort. True, he was Obergruppenfuehrer in the Party as well, but that after all did not amount to much, for there were plenty of other Obergruppenfuehrers. But now in Sofia he alone had authority and power. Minister of the Reich! Pah! He was not interested in diplomacy and had no patience with diplomatic jargon. The Bulgarians must realize that he was not a diplomat, that he had not come as a diplomat. "The era of diplomatic relations between Germany and Bulgaria is over. With my arrival begins the era of life-and-death co-operation!" Good sentence. He remembered how startled those Bulgarian journalists had been by it when he had greeted them with it at his first interview with the local press. In spite of that they had been stupid enough to refer to him in their damned papers as "His Excellency the German Minister." What nonsense! He remembered the surprise of the Censor, when he requested that from then on he should be called "Obergruppenfuehrer Beckerle." He wasn't a diplomat; he was the representative of the Party. He had not come to attend diplomatic functions. He had come to make Bulgaria obey the Fuehrer's orders.

Hans Adolf Beckerle pressed a button on his desk. The door of the room opened and his secretary, the young Party member Snellbach, stood at attention.

"When is the War Minister coming, Snellbach?"

"At half past six, Herr Obergruppenfuehrer."

"Are you sure he said nothing as to the nature of his visit?"

"I spoke to his A.D.C., Captain Penev, Herr Obergruppenfuehrer. He said the general wanted to see you this afternoon on a very urgent matter. He telephoned at half past three. You were in your room and I did not want to disturb you."

"Good!"

Snellbach saluted and left the room.

Hans Adolf Beckerle lighted a cigarette and looked out of the window. It was still raining heavily. The boulevard by the garden of the Legation was empty. Just opposite the big German naval flag was flapping, rain-drenched, from the building of the German Naval Headquarters, the former British Institute. What a gloomy afternoon! Hans Adolf Beckerle thought. What on earth can the War Minister want?

Beckerle knew General Mihov well. He did not doubt his loyalty; the general owed his present position to Beckerle and was not likely to forget it. What is more, Beckerle had told him that he would recommend him to the Fuehrer for the great Order of the German Eagle, and Beckerle could count on Mihov's vanity. But why should Mihov want to see him so urgently? He had seen him yesterday and the general had had nothing special to report. Was it another quarrel with the Prime Minister, or were the republicans up to more mischief? Beckerle was sick of these republicans. Stupid, he thought, very

stupid, to permit the existence of a republican movement. It did not matter that it was illegal. To know the identity of its leaders and yet to tolerate their existence! Stupid! They should arrest all these republicans, democrats and whatnots and shoot them! It was war! Tolerance and mercy were out of place. . . .

The telephone rang. "General Mihov is here, Herr Obergruppenfuehrer."

"Show him in!"

Hans Adolf met the general at the door. He shook his hand warmly and said: "Glad to see you. Something important?" This was Beckerle's technique with the generals. He tried to give an impression of solemn efficiency which he found went down well with the military.

"Rather important," replied the War Minister, sinking into one of the armchairs.

Beckerle remained standing. This was another of his tricks: his tall figure, as well he knew, was very impressive in uniform and when speaking he always walked up and down the room, as though rehearsing a public speech.

"Well?"

General Mihov took a glass of *slivovitsa* from the table next to him—Beckerle always drank the local drinks when he was with Bulgarians, and pretended to love *slivovitsa*, a kind of strong plum brandy—and said:

"It's about George Valkov's death sentence."

Beckerle walked up to the general and asked:

"Well, what about it? He was sentenced to death on the eleventh of February and executed, I presume, next day."

He started pacing up and down the room again. General Mihov emptied another glass of *slivovitsa*, summoned all his courage and said loudly:

"I thought so, too. But today they told me that he wasn't."

"What? Do you mean to tell me that Valkov has not yet been executed in spite of his death sentence! Do you mean to say that all that evidence our Berlin police inspectors collected against him was not sufficient?"

"You must ask your friend General Daskalov about it, Herr Obergruppenfuehrer. . . . After all I have been minister for only five days."

Beckerle was satisfied with the general's rather rude reply. He knew that Mihov hated the former War Minister. There was a chance of making something out of this. . . .

"Between you and me," he began, speaking slowly and emphasizing each word, "I never trusted Daskalov. I don't mind telling you that I used what influence I have in the Palace to have him removed. He was a good fellow but a bad general. The New Order has no use for men who are afraid to take responsibilities. We need courageous men, men who know how and when to act, men who follow the path of the New Europe without looking back. . . ."

General Mihov took another glass of *slivovitsa*. He felt reassured and happy. There he was, a minister of only five days' standing, and about to surprise Beckerle with some good news. That fool Daskalov! There was no likelihood of his returning to the War Ministry if that was Beckerle's opinion of him. Now was the time to impress the German. Mihov knew well enough how powerful the "Minister of the Reich" was.

"I am a man of action," he announced proudly. "Three hours ago I signed an order for the execution of George Valkov. He will be hanged at dawn tomorrow."

Beckerle's face did not change—he did not want to be-

try his satisfaction. Mihov must not have the illusion that he was of any importance.

"That's all very well, Herr General. But are you sure they won't postpone it again?"

The general rose to his feet. His pride was hurt.

"I am in command at the War Ministry!" he shouted. "When I give orders they are carried out immediately. I am a man of action."

Hans Adolf sat in another armchair near the table with the drinks. He took a glass of *slivovitsa* and without looking at Mihov said simply:

"You know, Herr General, our general staff will be proud of you!"

The War Minister sat down contented. Beckerle couldn't have paid him a greater compliment. The German General Staff would be proud of him. . . . He drank several more glasses of *slivovitsa* before he left. Beckerle accompanied him to the front door. When he entered his powerful twelve-cylinder Cadillac the War Minister saw that the rain was still falling.

After Maria Valkova's telephone message K. felt extremely worried. During the last few days he had hardly slept at all. He knew only too well that the new War Minister was *plus royaliste que le roi*, and that he would not be likely to postpone George's execution much longer. General Daskalov had been more human. After all he had agreed to wait until George's lawyers brought him further evidence and he had promised to postpone the execution at any rate until the end of April. But Mihov was dangerous; he would want to please his masters during his first days in the new position he owed to them, and George's

execution was to him but the means of doing so. Beckerle had been pressing for it ever since the Sofia Military Court had pronounced the death sentence.

K. started telephoning immediately. He first asked the King's secretary whether he knew anything, and received the answer he had expected: the Palace knew nothing and would not be likely to know in any case, for according to the new law death sentences passed by the special courts were not sent to the King for signature, unless the War Minister so decided. Therefore, the secretary explained, K. should make inquiries at the War Ministry, not at the Palace.

Damn it, K. thought as he slammed the receiver down. Did the man think he was a fool? As though the War Minister's decisions were not immediately communicated to the King, and more often than not dictated by him. He dialed the War Ministry number and made an effort to control his anger.

"May I speak to Captain Penev, the Minister's A.D.C.?"

"Who is speaking?"

"K., a former minister."

To his surprise Penev replied almost at once. His tone was insolent.

"What do you want?"

"Could you please tell me whether there is any fresh news in regard to George Valkov's position?"

"I wish you wouldn't bother me about such matters. I am not an information bureau dealing with the fate of all the prisoners in this country!"

"I apologize, but you know that Valkov is one of our best friends and it's only natural I should be interested. You remember General Daskalov promised . . ."

"What General Daskalov promised is no business of

mine! General Mihov is War Minister now. The sooner you realize that the better!"

"Well then, could I speak to General Mihov?"

"Of course not! Do you think the general has time——"

"But after all, Captain Penev, you might at least ask him."

"No, I can't disturb him."

K. lost his temper. "Look here, Penev, at least try to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"You seem to forget the respect you owe to my rank. You should call me Captain Penev, not Penev!"

K. shouted back: "Idiots like you disgrace the uniform they wear!"

"Shut up, you traitor! I shall have you arrested!"

"I am ready for you. But the time will come when we shall not even bother to arrest you and your like!"

And he rang off. It was several minutes before he started telephoning again. He was terribly hurt by Penev's rudeness. After all he was one of the oldest politicians in the country and felt himself entitled to at least elementary courtesy from government officials. But his personal pride was of no account—all that mattered was that Valkov should be saved—and K. lifted the receiver again. . . .

At half past ten that evening one of K.'s friends, a deputy from the opposition, managed to get General Mihov on the telephone. The War Minister assured him that there was "nothing new" in regard to Valkov's position. Meanwhile K. spoke to the Director of the Central Prison. The Director was apologetic.

"I am sorry I am not allowed to give you any information."

"Can't you even tell me if there's something new, or is the situation still the same?"

"I cannot tell you that either!" came the Director's laconic reply.

It was about eleven o'clock when K., two opposition deputies and three other politicians—George's best friends—arrived at the Valkov house. The door was opened by George's daughter, an eighteen-year-old girl whose eyes were red and swollen. Vicky, George's little boy, looked frightened and his big brown eyes were unusually solemn, but he was not crying. Perhaps he was too young—he was only six—to understand what it was all about. He knew only that his father was away and in danger. But he was used to that. For the last seven years George had not spent more than two months of the year at home. The rest of his time was divided between the Police Building, various prisons throughout the country, concentration camps and a series of remote mountain villages where he had been interned at one time or another.

K. and his friends remained with Vicky in George's study. It was a small room with a desk and four inexpensive chairs as sole furniture. A big signed photograph of Masaryk hung over the desk: George had known him for many years and the Czech President had liked him. Under the portrait were two anti-Fascist cartoons which the police had not bothered to confiscate. A powerful American radio, an expensive contrast to the shabby furniture, covered one-third of the desk. George had saved up for over a year to buy it. "I have to know what's going on in this crazy world," he used to say. On the other side of the desk stood photographs of Vicky and of George's fox terrier, Doggy, which was famous for its dislike of policemen. As soon as a policeman entered the house, which was not

an infrequent occurrence, Doggy would raise such hell that all George's neighbors knew of the visit. "Valkov's being arrested again," they would remark casually.

They were waiting for Maria, George's wife, who was in the other room. She was very tired, Vicky explained. She had gone out early that afternoon with their weekly parcel for George and she had come back much later than usual, wet to the skin and covered with mud. He had heard her telling his sister that this was the end. He did not know what she meant by that but his sister had begun to cry. And she had cried and cried the whole evening.

K. felt his eyes blur with tears. He listened to Vicky's simple narrative without daring to look either at the child or at his friends. They too were silent. God, it's hard to be here in his room near his wife and children, to sit at his desk, to look at his pictures, and to know that in several hours' time he will no longer be alive. No one who has not experienced it can understand that feeling. If hell exists in this or any other world this is it, K. thought. To be in your best friend's house with his wife and children before he is put to death. Yes, *put to death*. If he were on his deathbed after a long illness, if he were dying in great pain or of old age, there would be some consolation in the knowledge that it was not in man's power to prevent such death. But George was forty; he was full of energy and life. Why should *he* die?

The telephone rang and K. moved toward it as though roused from a dream. The other men looked at him with anxious eyes. Who could it be at this hour? What could it be? The door opened—she was there, pale and frightened, staring at the telephone.

"Don't you bother," K. said. "I'll answer it."

He hardly dared touch the telephone. But there it was, near the radio, still ringing and ringing, relentlessly.

"Hello! . . . Speaking. . . . Yes, what is it? . . ."

K. turned his face away from the others for fear its expression might have bad news to betray.

"Of course I know him, what does he say? . . . Well, thank you very much."

There was a note of relief and even of cheerfulness in K.'s voice, as he put the receiver down and said:

"Good news. It was Pavlov, the lawyer. He spoke to the Attorney General half an hour ago, who told him that at the Ministry of Justice they had no news of any forthcoming execution. They would be bound to know, as the prison authorities always inform them. . . ."

The tension of the room was lessened but still no one spoke.

"That is really good news," K. continued. "You must go to bed now, Maria. And try not to worry any more."

But she was looking at him with strange eyes. "I can't," she whispered.

"Don't be silly, my dear. You'll feel better after a good sleep."

"I have an awful feeling. I couldn't sleep. I shall wait!"

"Wait for what?"

"I don't know."

She went back to the other room. Vicky began crying softly. K. and his friends looked at one another; they too decided to wait. Outside it was still raining heavily.

Eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one, two, three, four, ninety-five, ninety-six . . . yes, ninety-six. Three times in succession ninety-six! Ninety-six and ninety-six and

ninety-six. Bad. Very bad! Definitely bad. It's for today.

Thousands of thoughts zigzagged through George's head as he lay there on his mattress. After all, it's not so bad being sentenced to death; at least one is allowed to smoke all day long and . . . count the spots on the walls in peace! Ninety-six. And ninety-six again. And again ninety-six. He had been sixty-one days in this blasted cell, and every day he counted those spots on the wall. Ten times, twenty times. Superstition? Yes, superstition, and why not? When he came back to the cell after the military court had sentenced him to death he looked at the spots and decided: I shall count them three times. If I get the same number three times running, it means I'm done for—it will be tomorrow. But he didn't get the same number. For sixty-one days he never got the same number. Ninety-five, or ninety-seven, or even ninety-eight. But now, now, there had been ninety-six three times in succession. Yes, ninety-six. He counted them in different ways. First he began with the spots near the door and finished up with the big one over his bed. Then he started off with the three tiny spots under the window. And the third time he began with the big spot over the bed. But still there were ninety-six. Three times ninety-six.

They would think he was mad, his friends, if they knew what he was doing. Counting spots on the walls! And why not? Didn't Monte Cristo in his cell play with a spider? Didn't he? What had caused these spots anyway? Strange, George thought, very strange. For sixty-one days he had been counting those spots and he had never asked himself what they were. He turned round and stared at the big spot above the bed. It was almost a circle. A big

circle. Moisture? Yes, it was definitely moisture. These damned walls were so damp, no wonder there were these big patches of moisture. Moisture! It was raining outside, too. The earth would be very wet. And the grave all water. They would throw his body into a big hole of mud. George shivered and instinctively drew the blanket closer to him.

He caught sight of four little spots to the right of the big circle. Almost black they were. Moisture? No, it must be something oily. It looked like soap. Why on earth soap? Of course, George thought, one associates everything one sees with what is in one's own mind. Soap! *Soap!* SOAP! . . . He stroked his neck. There was no soap on it . . . yet. But the rope, the rope, *his* rope, would be smeared with soap. Lots of soap. The more the better. Death comes quicker that way. When there is enough soap the rope tightens faster around your neck and you die sooner. Soap! He clasped his two hands round his neck. Should he try again? He had tried hundreds of times in the last few weeks. There! He pressed his fingers into his neck and tightened his grasp. He felt the blood rushing to his eyes and pounding in his ears. He loosened his grip and took a deep breath. It was not a pleasant feeling. . . .

He got out of bed and walked toward the door. It was twenty-five past two by his watch. If it were for today they would have come at least half an hour earlier. He knew the procedure well. Every prisoner knows it. They come at two and take you out. The Director tells you that the time has come. Then you are taken out into the courtyard where the gallows are. And the priest. And the prosecutor. He reads your sentence, the priest says God has forgiven you and you climb onto the little table beneath the gallows. The rope is fastened around your neck, and

they kick the table away. Then the hangman throws himself on you and holds you down by your legs. The more he pulls you the quicker you die. If he leaves you to hang without his help you die slowly and painfully. But hangmen are usually kind people and they help you to die. . . .

I shall live another day, George thought. What a life this is! Until six he would walk round and round the cell counting all the spots on the walls. Then breakfast. Then a two-hour walk in the courtyard. He would try to speak to the other prisoners and give them cigarettes. Poor prisoners! Their cigarettes were strictly rationed. They had none of the privileges attached to a death sentence. All the cigarettes you want. Better food. Books to read. You can sleep while the others work. You need to, for during the night you sleep only until one. No prisoner who has been sentenced to death ever sleeps later than one: it's an unwritten rule of prison life. You wake automatically. From two to three is the critical time. From three on you may relax but you never go back to sleep, for sometimes, though very rarely, they come even after three.

Yes, I shall live another day. And George began pacing up and down the cell. He thought about the war. The news from Russia was good. There, at least, Hitler was not having his own way. But Europe would be in chains for a long time to come. How naïve of the other prisoners to think that the Allies would soon liberate the Balkans and open wide the gates of the Central Prison. Though that, too, would come one day. . . . He hoped against hope that he might live to see that day. . . . After the war . . . He would have his newspaper again. There would be no censorship. No one to arrest or intern him any more. Vicky would go to school and he would have enough

money to buy him all the toys and books he wanted. And what articles he would write!

Suddenly he stopped dead. What was that? God, what was it? It's not true! It can't be true! He refused to believe the evidence of his own ears. It must be his imagination. Steps in the corridor outside. Steps. In *his* corridor. Steps. Near *his* door. His heart was hammering against his breast. And the blood was pulsing so loudly in his ears that he did not hear when the key turned in the lock . . .

The light outside was brighter than in the cell and the silhouettes of the three men hovered against it, three massive shadows. The Director was the first to enter the cell.

"It's today, Valkov. I'm sorry. It's unpleasant for me too, you know. But orders are orders."

All of a sudden George became very calm. He felt relieved. A heavy burden had fallen from his shoulders, the burden of uncertainty. In a quiet voice he replied:

"Today? I knew it. I was counting those spots on the wall. They said it would be today."

The Director looked at the wall in astonishment.

"Don't paint the walls after I've . . . gone. The next chap will have something to play with, too."

He lighted a cigarette, glanced around the cell and laughed.

When the sharp wind and the rain slapped George's face he became nervous again. It wasn't dark as he had expected it to be, for the courtyard was flooded with light from several huge electric lamps. As he turned the corner of the building he saw . . . He knew the place that, in common with other prisoners, he had seen so vividly and so often, but now for the first time he was seeing it in reality.

There to the right, not far from the wall, were the gallows.

They stopped. They were not more than ten yards away from it. It looked incredibly big. What was that hanging from the rope? Oh, yes, the bag. He stared at it and saw that it was made of sackcloth and seemed gray and dirty. How ugly! It would be thrown over his head so that people shouldn't see the expression on his face. He suddenly visualized himself as he would be then. He had heard that one's face becomes purple, purplish-black. The eyes stretch from the sockets. The mouth is set in a frightful grimace. The tongue hangs out and a foam of saliva and blood bubbles down it. . . . They were right to cover one's face with that wretched bag! Those who die peacefully in their beds have a death mask. It's not ugly, it may be beautiful, as though molded by sleep, not death. But here you are not entitled to a mask, only to the true face of death: bloody, terrifying, fearful. . . .

He turned to the hangman, who was a gypsy.

"Come here, Mango!"

All gypsies are nicknamed Mango, so why make an exception for this one?

"How long have you been a hangman?" George asked.

"Four years."

"Are you good at your job?"

The gypsy laughed and his white teeth flashed between his lips. Obviously he wanted to say that he was an expert hangman. George handed him a five-hundred-leva note.

"It's a good tip, isn't it?" he smiled.

It was indeed. The gypsy's face lighted up. It was more than his monthly salary. He looked at it lovingly before putting it in his pocket. Then he went away and reappeared in a few minutes dragging after him a big object which George at first mistook for a box. But no, it was a

coffin—his coffin. How small it looked. Perhaps because it was made of boards nailed roughly together.

Suddenly he heard a voice. An officer near him, standing at attention, was reading out his sentence. George wasn't interested. He had heard it at the trial and later at the district Military Court, and a copy of it had been handed to him on his arrival at the prison. Now he had to listen to it again. Luckily the officer was reading through it at top speed, in the hope that the document would not be spoiled by the rain. How incredibly long it was! Words, words, words! He hardly heard them . . . whereas . . . article . . . military law . . . high treason . . . Finally the officer raised his voice . . . more words, but the first true words. Sentenced to death by hanging! How very true! Hanging, hanging, hanging . . .

Then the priest came up, stifling a yawn; obviously he had been dragged hurriedly from his bed. He looked ridiculous in his dripping black surplice, like a bedraggled crow. Poor priest, George thought. Why should they oblige him to come here? Why should God's name be mingled in such dirty affairs? Perhaps it was better in a way. Why shouldn't God know and see what His creatures here on earth were doing and be sorry that He created man!

"God will pardon you, my son," murmured the priest. "Die in peace!"

That made George angry. Die in peace! He wasn't dying in peace, he was dying in war. If there were peace, what he meant by peace, he would not be dying.

"Prepare yourself for heaven with a cleansed soul," were the priest's next words, and George retorted: "Don't you see that they have prepared everything for me? Why should I bother?" And he pointed to the gallows and to

the gypsy, who was waiting impatiently beside the coffin.

"God bless you," the priest said finally and gave George a crucifix to kiss. He bent down and touched it with his lips; it too was wet. To his surprise he felt happier, calmer. But he had no time to savor this breath of relief, for the Director came up to him and George knew that this was the last formality, before the hangman took charge of him.

"I'll send your things home," the Director promised.

"What things?"

"Your clothes and books."

"I see. Well, thank you. And what about my body?"

The Director, who did not expect that question, volunteered his favorite cliché:

"I'm afraid I do not know."

"Nor do I," replied George with a smile.

He walked over to the gypsy, who led him up to the gallows. It was simply made: two poles about fifteen feet high were stuck in the wet muddy earth, not more than five or six feet apart, with another pole across the top from which the rope and the bag were hanging. An ordinary deal table stood beneath the rope with a chair beside it.

"Come on, Mango!"

The gypsy held another piece of rope in his hands and looked apologetically up at him. George understood and put his hands behind his back. The gypsy bound them together. In answer to his gesture George stepped up onto the chair and from there onto the table. As the rope brushed his cheek he felt his heart fiercely beating time. And there was so little time left. He realized how afraid he was to die, and was ashamed of his fear. But why should he be ashamed? He didn't want to die. He hated death

and he loved life. Oh, how he loved life! Why should he die here, now, on this bleak rainy morning? Why . . . ? His thoughts were interrupted by the gypsy, who began to tie his legs together. George noticed that the gypsy's hands were very dirty. He looked up and saw the officer staring at him. He was obviously pleased to be witnessing the execution of a traitor. The Director turned his back, whether because he was too sensitive or because his interest had been blunted by too many similar proceedings George did not know. The priest, his job finished, was hurrying back to bed. There were three or four guards strolling about in the distance. He looked at the prison building. Night lent its outlines an unaccustomed majesty. He looked round the big courtyard, imagining what the feelings of the two thousand prisoners would be when they were ushered out for their early morning walk. They would all see him hanging from the rope, for he knew that, according to the rules, his body would hang there for three hours as a beneficial warning to the other prisoners.

A pungent whiff of sweat and filth filled George's nostrils as the gypsy jumped up onto the table beside him. He realized that he had only a few minutes more to live. He must say something. His last words. How stupid not to have thought about it before. Should he curse the Government? It seemed pointless. Or shout "Long live Liberty!" as other prisoners who had died there before him had shouted. Rather too theatrical. What about "Down with Fascism!" Banal! What the hell could he say? And then, as the gypsy reached out for the rope, he had an idea. He smiled. He took a deep breath and spat down onto the ground. . . .

The gypsy tied the rope around his neck. At last he

had that feeling he had imagined and rehearsed so often. He turned his head sideways to find out whether there was really soap on the rope, and the rope turned with his neck. The knot was too tight. He closed his eyes. The gypsy was drawing the bag over his head, the bag that would cover his face in death. The wet cloth tickled his nose and his cheeks. When he opened his eyes he was in complete darkness and he could hardly breathe.

The gypsy jumped from the table. Only several seconds more. They were seconds of protest, not of resignation. This must stop! Why should he die without a fight? He tried desperately to free his hands, but the only result was a flame of pain in his wrists, where they had been bruised by the rope. Suddenly he felt that the table wasn't there any more and something struck him below the chin. . . . That was his last sensation. When the gypsy grasped his legs and began dragging him down—was it to show that he deserved the big tip, or was it professional routine?—George was already unconscious. . . .

The same day all the Sofia newspapers published the following official communiqué: "The War Ministry announces that today, April 10, 1942, George Georgiev Valkov, former editor of the newspaper *Pladne*, was hanged in the Sofia prison. He had been sentenced to death for high treason by the Sofia Special Military Court on February 11, 1942."

A Government paper also inserted the following editorial note:

"George Valkov's execution is not merely the execution of a traitor. It is the death blow to a whole system of treachery and to the antistate ideas which Valkov and his like had propagated for the last fifteen years both in

Sofia and in Belgrade. Valkov was the editor of *Pladne*, which was the mouthpiece of the so-called South Slav 'ideals.' We must admit that this deplorable teaching attained some popularity. Only when the great Fuehrer of the Third Reich smashed Yugoslavia was it realized that the very idea of collaboration with the Serbs was wrong in principle and could have been disastrous in practice, for Belgrade was nothing but a sinister center of the international dark powers of the Anglo-Saxon world. Such was the shameful treachery of George Valkov and his *Pladne* gang, that when that rag was suppressed by the Government five years ago the last issue of the paper had the headline 'Long Live Yugoslavia' splashed across the entire front page."

## CHAPTER XIX

### *Sky Guerrillas*

IF SIX Russian soldiers land at Varna how many will reach Sofia?

Six million!

This was the most popular saying throughout the country during the summer of 1941. It may require a little explanation. The population of Bulgaria being six million, it means that if six Russian soldiers landed in Varna the whole Bulgarian nation would have joined up with them by the time they reached Sofia!

It is difficult to explain the pro-Russian feeling among the Bulgarian people. Difficult because one may reach various erroneous conclusions. Many observers have branded Bulgaria as completely Red. Others have argued that the Bulgarian peasant is at heart an individualist and consequently anti-Communist, but that he remains grateful to Russia for having liberated his country. The truth is that the Bulgarians are both pro-Russian and pro-Soviet. This for many reasons, but the main one is the part played by Russia, not only in Bulgaria's liberation, but also in Bulgaria's development as a European state during the last sixty years. Throughout the nineteenth century, when a tide of nationalism swept many European peoples into revolution, the Bulgarians looked to Russia for protection. In 1876—the so-called April revolution—the Bulgarians revolted against the Sultan whose domination at that time

extended to the entire Balkan peninsula. The insurgents were crushed after several weeks of bloody fighting and, as always happened in such cases, several villages and towns were destroyed and their populations slaughtered. About ten thousand people were killed in one district alone and Europe, at that time unaccustomed to wholesale butchery à la Hitler, was appalled. Gladstone wrote his famous booklet, "The Bulgarian Atrocities and the Eastern Question," which raised public opinion in Britain and America to the boiling point. International committees were appointed to investigate what had taken place and their evidence was unfavorable to the Sultan. Finally in 1877 Russia drew her sword. She crossed the Danube from Rumania and after a long and difficult campaign that cost her over 200,000 killed and wounded she defeated the Turks and reached the Straits. Bulgaria was free. In the village of San Stefano, near Constantinople, peace with Turkey was signed and the new frontiers of the Bulgarian state were established.

Europe, however—Disraeli in London and Bismarck in Berlin—was not satisfied; the new Balkan state was too big, and they feared that Russia would have too strong a foothold in the peninsula. So the maps were redrawn; Russia, offended and humiliated, had to agree, and the Congress of Berlin in 1878 left Bulgaria with less than one-third of her San Stefano territory but freed from Turkish rule. From that time a profound feeling of gratitude toward Russia was rooted deep in the soul of every Bulgarian. It has survived from generation to generation and I do not think will ever fade away.

The ordinary peasant still refers to Russia as "Mother Russia" or "Dedo Ivan" (Grandfather Ivan). "Dedo Ivan will do this or that," "What will Dedo Ivan think?"

—these are the phrases used by the simple folk when they talk of Russia; they seldom say "Russia."

The cultural influence of Russian thought and Russian literature is no less great. Russian writers and poets are studied in every state school. There is no educated Bulgarian who is not familiar with the works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, Pushkin and Gorky. The similarity of the language helps, of course; of all Slav languages Bulgarian is the nearest to Russian. Every Bulgarian can read Russian and, with the aid of a simple dictionary, can understand even the most difficult scientific and technical works. When, in 1938, after long hesitation King Boris' Government decided to allow the Soviet Government to open a Russian bookshop in Sofia, the police were obliged to guard the building, so numerous were the people who flocked to buy books. In the autumn of 1938 the Russians were at last permitted to sell the Moscow newspaper *Izvestia*. Although this paper, in spite of being sent by air, always arrived late and although, technically, it could not be considered a well-produced paper, its success was fantastic. Newspaper agents throughout the country ordered it in such enormous—for Bulgaria—quantities that had it been permitted to circulate freely it would have had a larger circulation than any paper published in Sofia.

Such Russian films as were permitted by the strict censor had similar, if not greater, success. They ran for months, and tickets for the cinemas where they were showing were sold out weeks in advance. In the Russian newsreels the censors cut all shots of Stalin and of other members of the Soviet Government, for when they saw them the audiences would rise to their feet and cheer interminably.

One of the greatest and most interesting pro-Russian manifestations took place in August 1940. The occasion was trivial. The Moscow football club *Dinamo* was due to arrive in Sofia to play against two Bulgarian football teams. At that time there were several world-famous American journalists in Sofia and I remember Bob St. John sent five thousand words to his agency describing what he said was the biggest spontaneous manifestation he had ever seen!

The Sofia police asked for reinforcements from the provincial police force and several trainloads of constables arrived from all over the country in time for the great occasion. The match was allowed to take place only under the following conditions: two regiments of the Sofia garrison were to guard the stadium and its approaches on a half-mile radius and not more than 20,000 spectators would be allowed to enter the stadium, although it could easily accommodate 30,000. The ground would be surrounded by a cordon of soldiers three deep.

The proposed police measures were known to everyone—I have always been amazed to see how well informed the public is in countries where censorship muzzles all free expression of thought and information—and the people of the capital were indignant. “We’ll teach them a lesson!” they vowed.

And they did.

All the foreign correspondents and all the local journalists went to the Bojurishte airport, five miles outside Sofia, to meet the Moscow football team. It was pouring rain and I hesitated about going, thinking that no demonstration worth seeing could take place in such a deluge. But Naum assured me I was wrong and urged me to go.

In spite of the rain ten thousand peasants were waiting

around the airfield. It was an impressive and at the same time a pathetic sight. Many of them had been there since morning, and they were wet and tired. They stood there patiently, clasping the bunches of wild flowers they had brought with them. The airport was surrounded by cordons of special troops and the military commander, alarmed by the huge crowd, announced that the Russians would not be arriving that day. But the peasants greeted this information with the stolid disbelief which is their usual reaction to all official utterances, and continued to stand there in the rain.

The Soviet planes arrived at five—two twin-engined silver-coated machines gleaming bright in the rain. The peasants yelled “Ura!”—the Russo-Bulgarian war cry. They surged forward, heedless of the barrier of bayonets, and forced their way through the cordons. In a few minutes they had overcome all resistance and entered the airport triumphantly. Cheering wildly, they surrounded the two planes. Their intention was as fantastic as it was pathetic: in their enthusiasm they wanted to lift the planes onto their shoulders!

As the footballers got out they were pelted with flowers. It took them nearly an hour to go from the planes to the cars that were waiting for them outside the airport—a distance of less than one hundred yards! When the procession of cars started off toward the capital I realized that Naum was right: this was something really unusual.

Our car was directly behind one of the Soviet cars, and from the moment we entered the city it took us one hour and a half to reach the hotel where the Russians were going to stay. Normally it would have taken five minutes. Our car was lifted off the ground eleven times. The crowd thought that we too were Russians, but in any case they

had reached such a pitch of excitement that they would have gladly borne all the cars in the procession in triumph through the city! There were over 150,000 people in the streets that afternoon. (The population of Sofia is 250,000.) The police and the special troops that had been brought from the provinces were quite helpless. No one paid the faintest attention to them. Our car was overflowing with flowers and so many enthusiasts clapped me on the back that my shoulders ached for a week afterward. By the evening 7,000 arrests had been made but most of the people had to be released, as there was not enough accommodation for them. Several hundred policemen were casualties. And until late into the night thousands and thousands of people gathered around the hotel and in the neighboring streets shouting: "Long live Russia!"

Naum told me that the leaders of the Workers' Union were themselves astonished at the success of the demonstration. They had asked their sympathizers to assemble in the streets through which the "comrades" would pass. The rest had arranged itself. Half the population of Sofia had spontaneously acclaimed Russia in the person of the Russian footballers.

The same thing happened at the matches. I took James Holbourn, the *Times* correspondent in Moscow, who was in Sofia on his way to Turkey, to see the first match. He said it was one of the most extraordinary things he had ever seen. The entire public cheered the Russians without ceasing and ignored the local team altogether. To their great delight the Sofia team *was* beaten! Afterward I spoke to the players, and one of the Bulgarians told me that for the first time in his life he had sincerely hoped his team would be beaten.

One of the reasons for the popularity and the strength of the Workers' movement in Bulgaria is the popularity of one of its first leaders, George Dimitrov, later head of the Third International. He is undoubtedly a man of great personality, ability and character. Walter Duranty once told me that he considered Dimitrov one of the most intelligent men he had ever met. I myself have been interested in Dimitrov ever since I was a schoolboy. His nephew was a classmate and a friend of mine and used to tell many fascinating stories about his uncle, who was already at that time (1934) a world-famous political figure. I remember the enthusiasm with which my friend read me Dimitrov's speeches at the Reichstag Fire trial and how we laughed together at the witty comments on Nazi justice which so annoyed Goering when he gave evidence against him. From time to time my friend received letters from his uncle and these were great events. He would read them to me over and over again until I knew them by heart.

Later when I was studying Bulgarian political history I found, in the dusty and forgotten minutes of the Bulgarian Sobranye during the First World War, some of the most interesting political speeches I have ever read: the speeches of George Dimitrov from 1916 to 1918 when he was a deputy in the Sofia assembly and one of the leaders of the Workers' Party. They were courageous; he criticized the Government and the military authorities in the most violent terms, little caring whether death or imprisonment was the result. They were prophetic; as early as 1916 he spoke of the tragic events which occurred in Bulgaria in 1923 and 1925. They were republican; he did not hesitate to declare that the King and his dynasty had nothing in common with the Bulgarian people and should go back where they belonged—i.e., to Germany. And the

speeches in themselves were brilliant in their construction and in their phrasing. As I read them I understood why he had such a powerful influence over his followers.

Dimitrov was born in Sofia, the son of a workman. His father died while he was still a child. His mother did not marry again and worked her way through life alone. She is alone still, for her famous son, whom she has not seen for twenty years, is banished from his country and can do nothing for her. I shall never forget my visit to Mrs. Dimitrova's house. It was in 1937. She lived, and probably still lives in a tiny house outside the city. I went there with the British photographer and journalist, James Allan Cash, and another friend of mine who later became the leader of the Students' Workers' movement and who is now either in prison or dead. The house was too small to be called a house—it consisted of one room with a tiny cellar which was in fact the kitchen. But it was neatly furnished and immaculately clean. When we entered Mrs. Dimitrova was sitting upright in a wooden chair with her glasses on, reading a book. My friend introduced us.

"These are the journalists I spoke to you about. They want very much to talk to you."

"Sit down, my son," the old woman said with a friendly smile. "I'll make you some coffee."

We could not refuse, for she would have been offended. While she was in the kitchen I glanced round the room and was surprised to see a small harmonium near the bed, with an American hymnbook over the keyboard.

"She's a Protestant," my friend whispered. "Her greatest joy is to sit at the harmonium and play hymns."

When the old woman returned with the coffee, I began to ask her about her son's childhood. The present secretary of the Third International had been brought up in

the strictest religious discipline and his mother had wanted him to become a Protestant pastor. I thought of Stalin's mother whose ambitions lay in the same direction and whose most cherished desire was for her son to become an orthodox priest.

There is no doubt that Dimitrov's character was greatly influenced by his mother, herself a most interesting personality. She was widely read and her knowledge of politics was both extensive and sound. She did not differ from her son in her attitude toward the problems of social justice and workers' rights. For her, social justice meant equal distribution of wealth and she explained that the basic principles of this teaching can be found in the Bible. She regarded Christ as the first preacher of the ideals for the realization of which, according to her, her son was working. But she did not approve of revolution! "Perhaps because I'm a woman," she said. "We don't believe in violence. When we hear of so many men being killed our first thoughts go to the mothers of these men. Only a mother can understand another mother's grief."

As she spoke I kept looking at the harmonium. Over it hung two big pictures beautifully framed with a small crucifix between them. One was a photograph of George Dimitrov, the other a picture of Christ, the reproduction of an old Italian master. Allan Cash could not resist the temptation of asking Mrs. Dimitrova's permission to take a snapshot of that corner of the room. She smiled and replied: "If you wish it." And she posed for him there, beneath the two pictures. It made a strange photograph, that photograph of a simple working woman with the pictures of the two men in whom she believed.

Dimitrov was obliged to leave Bulgaria in 1923 when,

after Stamboliyski's assassination, King Boris' Government began a mass terror campaign throughout the country. The Workers' Party was suppressed and most of its leaders killed or imprisoned. Tsankov, the Prime Minister, formed what were perhaps the first Fascist storm troopers in Europe, the so-called "Shpits Commandi." They consisted of groups of ten, twenty or thirty men, led usually by Macedonian terrorists, and were the only loyal force at the disposal of Boris and Tsankov, who could not rely on the regular police force still under the influence of the Agrarians. The army, composed mainly of peasants, could not be used at all. So the Shpits Commandi were given complete powers in their fight against "the antistate elements." Their number was kept secret but reliable sources estimated them at not more than one thousand. Yet they were so ruthless and so well organized, and public opinion in Europe was so ignorant and so indifferent, that in the course of two years, from 1923 to 1925, these Shpits Commandi accounted for thirty thousand unofficial assassinations! By unofficial I mean unannounced, unjustified by any legal motive and the victims untried by any official court or by any other authority. Thirty thousand dead in a country that, at that time, had a population of five million! It amounted to approximately one-third of the total number of casualties suffered by Bulgaria during the entire war. But the loss was in fact an even greater one than the figures indicate. Those thirty thousand men were among the most valuable to the nation. They were the town and village intelligentsia, the real leaders of the people—teachers, doctors, officials, co-operative workers, mayors, technicians.

Boris and Tsankov directed their blows mainly at the two political movements that had strength enough to offer

resistance; the Agrarians and the Workers. Realizing that they could no longer continue to fight in accordance with constitutional methods, their own government having been overthrown by force and most of their leaders murdered in cold blood, the Agrarians joined hands with the Workers' Party, which was now operating illegally, and together they started organizing revolutionary committees throughout the country with the purpose of instigating mass revolution. George Dimitrov was in charge of the organization of northwestern Bulgaria.

But the United Front had a difficult war to fight. King Boris' diplomats in the various European capitals described the opponents of the regime as dangerous Reds who were about to overrun Bulgaria and then start their revolutionary march on Central Europe! The bogey of Communism was at that time a very powerful argument—so powerful that London and Paris allowed Boris, in spite of the strict clauses of the Paris Peace Treaties which limited Bulgaria's army to 20,000 men, to mobilize another 10,000 men. This strange concession to Boris gives the measure of the general nervousness which the mere mention of the word Bolshevism aroused, when one recalls that in 1923 any suggestion of revision of the Peace Treaties was regarded as the greatest blasphemy, and yet the permission granted to Bulgaria to increase her army *was*, par excellence, a revision of the treaty.

The first revolts organized by the United Front started in September 1923. In northwestern Bulgaria Dimitrov proclaimed a republic, with Berkovitsa as the headquarters of the revolutionary forces. In the south the rising was equally successful and when fighting started in the streets of Sofia, Boris and Tsankov lost courage. They were prepared to leave at any moment and Boris had actually made

plans to join his father in Germany when suddenly encouragement came from the most unsuspected quarter—Western Europe's chancelleries. The Shpits commandi did the rest but nevertheless it took them two years to "pacify" the country.

It was at that time that King Boris instituted his famous law for the Defense of the State, one of the cruelest in modern history. Capital punishment was the fate of any member of an "illegal" organization. The Workers' movement had been proclaimed illegal and it was sufficient for the police to state in a court of law that a person had "Communist" sympathies for the death sentence to follow automatically. The number of death sentences passed by the courts during the next few years was so high that even Boris refused to sign them all. The result of this was that several hundred prisoners lived for months and even years in a prolonged agony of uncertainty—condemned to death and always halfway between being pardoned and being executed. In our camp there was a man who had spent three years with a death sentence hanging over his head. He woke each morning expecting to be hanged that very day and the petition he sent each month asking to have his sentence commuted was always rejected. Thus were these prisoners kept suspended between life and death, and the ordeal was so great that many of them went mad. At the same time Boris' propagandists were working overtime extolling the love of the King for his people, manifested, according to them, by his refusal to sign these hundreds of death sentences. The Constitution gave Boris the right to pardon those condemned to death and nothing could have been easier for him, had he really desired to do so, but he preferred to try his hand at this new and subtle form of torture.

However, in spite of persecution and mass murder, the influence of the Workers' Union grew stronger and stronger. In the elections of 1931, thirty-two of the Workers' deputies were returned to the assembly, which was remarkable in view of the fact that throughout the country Worker candidates and their election agents had been arrested and executed. Soon after the elections one of the Workers' leaders was shot dead on his doorstep by two Macedonian assassins hired by the Palace. Later, regardless of the Constitution, the remaining Workers' deputies were simply expelled from the Sobranye and arrested. Most of them were killed.

In the 1938 elections seven Workers' deputies were returned. These deputies were elected in the towns, for in the villages nobody even bothered to ask the peasants to go to the polling booths and their votes were automatically registered for the Government candidates! In 1939 eleven Workers' deputies were elected. Their leader in the assembly was Luyben Dyukmedjev, a Sofia lawyer and an exceptionally able man, who had studied the French legal system in Paris and was a close friend of Léon Blum. His speeches—on the rare occasions when he was allowed to speak—were witty and powerful. In June 1941 he and ten of his supporters were arrested and tortured. After a short spell at the Gonda Voda camp they were sent, together with seven hundred other members of the Workers' Union, to a remote Greek island in the Aegean Sea. No one ever heard what happened to them after that. Perhaps no one will ever hear but there are enough of us who know how to guess.

As a journalist my contacts with the Workers had been purely personal. I saw the inside organization of their

movement at close quarters only in August 1941, when things again began to become too hot even for non-“Communist” anti-Fascist elements like myself. George’s second arrest was a clear indication of this. A friend from among the Workers, who had the flair of a sporting dog for such things, told me that in August and September the Gestapo would indulge in a new series of mass arrests and that anyone with “democratic” sympathies was a likely target. Another friend, whose brother worked in the Ministry of the Interior, warned me that I was getting on official nerves again, and that in the Ministry’s files were several reports stating that I had disregarded my promise not to speak about politics and that I had publicly declared that Russia would be victorious. I decided to disappear—that is, I left my home and went to live with friends. *Parti sans laisser d’adresse.*

This is a widespread practice in the Balkans nowadays and not very difficult. Acting on the assumption that the police, if they decide to do so, will arrest you in the early hours of the morning, you don’t sleep where they expect to find you. You sleep elsewhere and hope for the best. As they have thousands of arrests to make each week there’s a chance they may forget about you after a bit. I knew two young students who worked for the police; they had no money and no hope of decent employment. Their job was to go every night at midnight to the Police Building where they were given the addresses and descriptions of persons whom they had to arrest and bring to the Police Building. By day they were free to go to the university! Of course such casual workers were used only to arrest the smaller fry and half the time they were unsuccessful—they would return empty-handed or with only a few of the people they had been ordered to dig out. And in that

case often the names of the men they had been unable to find were dropped from the next day's list. Thus you might be a marked man at the beginning of the month and then, if you succeeded in avoiding arrest for a few days, be safe for the rest of the month!

So I moved into a house where eleven other people, all on the verge of arrest too, were already living. The house was rented in the name of a man who never went there. Those who could afford to, paid; those who couldn't, didn't. The Workers' Union paid for the members of their organization.

Six of the men were Workers, two were Social Democrats and one was Agrarian. It was, in miniature, a real United Front of anti-Fascist forces.

It was in this house that I met a Bulgarian parachutist who had come from Russia. He was brought there one evening by one of the Workers. All of us had read the official German communiqés about the parachutists which were published at length in the Sofia papers in July and August. These communiqés were no exception to the general rule of German communiqés: they were not true, or rather they contained one or two true facts camouflaged in a web of distortions and exaggerations. They asserted that sixty-two of the parachutists had been captured and about fifty killed. The rest were—and I hope still are—at large and doing extremely good work throughout the Balkans.

How many of these sky guerrillas came to the Balkan peninsula I do not know. The Workers quoted to me a figure several times that of those officially reported killed and captured. I saw only half a dozen of them. But I saw some of their work and it was really good; it cost several hundred Nazi soldiers and policemen their lives and greatly

disturbed the German transport system in the Balkans. The full story of this episode of underground warfare in Europe cannot be told until after Hitler's downfall. I will only describe the brief but eventful life of those sky guerrillas whose work and death I saw in the autumn of 1941. What struck me most about them was the strength of their solidarity—their international solidarity.

These men were not Russians; they were men from every Balkan country and from almost every region. They came and died in the name of that Balkan solidarity which Balkan governments have denied and opposed so much. They came and fought Fascism as the vanguard, perhaps, of the all-Balkan force that will one day guard the common interests of the Balkan peoples. They were the modern Balkan crusaders. The phrase is not mine; it belongs to Geoffrey Cox who, in his book *Defence of Madrid*, thus describes the International Brigade that saved the Spanish capital from the advancing Fascist forces. In Madrid, French, Germans, English, Americans, Russians, Rumanians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Italians and Austrians fought together, united in their strength of spirit, a strength which, as Cox observes, has not been witnessed in this world since the crusades. And that strength I found again in the parachutists.

The man who was brought to our house had come to see me. He explained that the parachutists wanted, with the aid of their supporters in Plovdiv, to attack the camp at Gonda Voda and to free the prisoners, many of whom were not only their best friends but would also be invaluable for future anti-Nazi activities. As I had been in the camp and as they knew from Naum that I was "reliable," would I please describe to them in detail the organization of the camp, its surroundings, its defenses, etc.

I was fascinated. All night long we discussed the possibilities of an attack. We drew maps. It was finally decided that the camp was to be attacked one day at dawn. One group of guerrillas would penetrate secretly into one of the buildings (the building where I had been and where the Red Hall was). Meanwhile the others would start firing in the forest from all sides at once, so as to mislead the police as to their numbers. A third group would keep the entrance of the Police Building, where most of the policemen slept, under fire to prevent any of them from coming out. Yet another group would try to get into the Police Chief's building and to kill him there.

Two days passed and the parachutist returned to tell me that this plan had been okayed by his "chiefs." The Workers in the Plovdiv district would try to inform some of the prisoners in advance so that they too could play their part. Arms and ammunition in sufficient quantities were waiting for us at a specified place. Was I prepared to go too, for my knowledge of the camp and of its surroundings might come in handy?

I said I was and we left that same night. We went by car to a small railway station near Sofia where we caught a slow train which reached Plovdiv at seven next morning. There were four of us—the parachutist, two Workers from the house and myself. We had bogus identification cards supplied by the Workers' Youth Union, which described us as students at the Sofia University, and we traveled in different compartments. In the blacked-out train the chances of any of us being recognized were slight. My compartment was full of snoring peasants and soldiers and, excited though I was, I too slept like a log the whole way.

At the Plovdiv station there was an unpleasant surprise

awaiting us. The whole station bristled with soldiers and none of the passengers was allowed to leave. We were pushed into one of the waiting rooms where there were already about two hundred other people and told to wait there. The doors were guarded by sentries. We soon realized that there was a purge going on. There had been "Communist disturbances," and all the houses in Plovdiv were being searched by the police and by German and Bulgarian troops. The passengers from the train had been detained for the same purpose. It was said that suspicious individuals had been arriving in the town of late.

I lighted a cigarette and felt that my hand was shaking. I looked over at the others—we had agreed not to recognize each other, whatever happened. They were smoking too.

## CHAPTER XX

### *The Red Flag Attacks*

WE HAD chosen the village of Nachovo as our meeting place after the attack on the camp because it was so poor, so peaceful and so isolated from the rest of the countryside that it seemed improbable that any policeman, in his search for "dangerous elements," would consider it worthy of his attention. It was one of the many hundred tiny villages that are scattered throughout the Rodopi mountains. These mountain villages are monuments in defiance of a nationalistic conception of the state in the Balkans. In the north the majority of them are Bulgarian, whereas in the center they are inhabited by Vlachs (Rumanians) many of whom do not know a single word of Bulgarian, and to the south the population is predominantly Greek. In the northwestern regions there are still thousands of the so-called Pomaks—fervent Moslems who still wear the crimson tarboosh which in Turkey was banned by Kemal Ataturk fifteen years ago. Nachovo itself was a Pomak village.

We had come through the Plovdiv police search all right, but the Plovdiv Workers had terrible casualties: the following night fifty of them, including most of the leaders of the local Workers' organization, were massacred. The sister of one of the Workers, with whom we had traveled from Sofia, a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl, was killed. Her only crime had been to pay no attention to the advances

of a local policeman who had hinted that although she was "Red" she could, if she chose, escape persecution.

Because of this last-minute police drive the attack on the camp was not properly organized. Only twenty-one men were to take part in it. Twenty-one men with fifteen rifles, ten revolvers and five bombs. The Workers in Plovdiv wanted to postpone the attack until a greater quantity of arms could be collected, but they were ordered to hurry.

They duly hurried. Having myself only a nodding acquaintance with firearms of any type I was told that I was "no good" and was not allowed to take part in the attack. Together with three other "noncombatants" I was sent to Nachovo, laden with food and clothes, to await the return of the twenty-one attackers with their booty of liberated prisoners.

But only nine of these men survived the attack. They brought fourteen prisoners with them and the bad news that Naum had been shot dead by a policeman at the very beginning of the attack. Ten more prisoners were said to have escaped in another direction. Those who reached Nachovo were all wounded and so were their nine rescuers.

Unfortunately the attack was not a success. At first the police guards were alarmed, assuming that only a powerful force would have dared attack them. But a small group of them managed to cut across the forest and to reach Assenovgrad. The local regiment was alerted and marched off up into the mountains. From their positions in the forest the attackers spotted the dense line of soldiers moving into larger focus as it drew nearer. They were obliged to retreat. They estimated that twenty policemen had been killed and many more wounded.\* The prisoners them-

\* By a cruel irony Peter Tsvetkov, the only policeman who was human and gentle, was among those killed.

selves had not been able to give any effective help. They were asleep when the attack started and the secret message that had been sent beforehand to the Workers' group in the camp had not reached them.

We stayed a week in Nachovo. Then we parted company. Only three of us returned to Sofia. The rest went southward to the Aegean.

One month later the Aegean glowed in the blood and fire of Drama's "October Revolution."

Drama is a small town on the north Aegean coast between the rivers Struma and Mesta. It is situated in one of the most fertile regions of the Balkans. Its population is Greek, but there are Bulgarians and Turks scattered in the villages round it. In October 1941 seventeen of the villages round Drama revolted. They rose to arms, formed a provisional government and attacked the Drama railway station. They captured it and held it for four days.

Later in the month a joint German and Bulgarian communiqué was issued in Sofia, stating that irregular Greek bands had come from southern Greece in order to instigate the peaceful population to revolt but that they had been suitably disposed of. On the other hand, exiled Greek Government circles in London and Cairo announced that a Greek national revolt in the Drama district had been suppressed with great cruelty by the Bulgarian occupation forces.

The Sofia communiqué was the sheerest nonsense. The Cairo-London explanations contained some of the truth, but not the whole of it.

The district of Drama had revolted, without the assistance of bands from anywhere. It was a local revolt against the Bulgarian authorities but it was not a national revolt.

It was, in miniature, a *Balkan* revolt. Among the leaders were Serbian and Bulgarian "Communists" in addition to the Greeks. The provisional governments established in the liberated villages were called communes, and when the insurgents captured the railway station they hoisted the Red Flag on the roof of the building. A manifesto was issued and later I saw a copy of it: it was printed in both Greek and Bulgarian. It attacked the Bulgarian authorities violently, branding them as Fascist oppressors, and it also condemned the Greek authorities. It stated point-blank that only the formation of a Balkan federation could bring peace and prosperity to the Balkan peoples.

It was this aspect of the revolt that so alarmed the Sofia Government. The secret Workers' paper *Rabotnichesko Delo* gave its full support to this "real vanguard of Balkan brotherhood," as it defined the Drama revolutionaries. Had it been simply a clash between the Bulgarian occupation troops and the hostile Greek population, the authorities in Sofia would have suppressed it without more ado and would have dispensed with the strain on their imagination of inventing fantastic stories of irregular Greek bands. But they had the wits to realize that Drama was more than that. Drama was a Red Flag attack. Drama was on a larger scale another Gonda Voda. And there was every indication that there would be plenty of bigger and better Dramas in the future.

The Sofia Government was wild with rage. The Drama revolt was checked with the utmost brutality and it can only be hoped that those responsible will be dealt with accordingly after the war. In addition to dozens of Stukas which razed several villages to the ground Boris dispatched to the scene of the revolt a contingent of his old

cronies, the same Shpits Commandi who between 1923 and 1925 had slaughtered thirty thousand Bulgarian peasants.

This brings me to one of the most important peace problems, that of war guilt. Many people think that it is impossible to pin down individual responsibilities and that the cry of "Hang the Kaiser!" which followed the last armistice cannot and should not be revised. Others believe that punishment should not be confined to the guilty leaders but should be extended to whole nations—though they are hard put to it to explain how this can be done. Apart from obvious technical difficulties, this is no solution to the problem of postwar justice. There is a hierarchy of guilt stretching from the utmost pinnacles of criminal brutality down to reluctant acquiescence, and the distinctions cannot just be summarily sacrificed either on the altar of convenience or on that of revenge.

But I think that the danger of this happening is very slight. I am more afraid of another wave of squeamish sentimentality parading as humanitarianism. After the last war the Bulgarian war criminals who had been condemned by the electorate in a large majority were saved from their trial by the intervention of allied diplomats in Sofia. When later they were released from prison they became the most fervent supporters of Boris' Fascist and pro-German policy. The people's tribunal might have sentenced two or three hundred men to death. This was more than the civilized world could stomach. These men survived and have since been directly and indirectly responsible for the deaths of many thousands of innocent people.

In my opinion the "Hang-the-Kaiser" policy is the right policy and should be applied to all the quisling leaders and all their assistants in the Balkans and in Europe. If

peace is to prevail the people's tribunals should be allowed to bring their own verdicts, and these should not be undermined by "humanitarian" interference from outside. For this time the problem is more complicated. Any sympathetic treatment of the Balkan quislings will herald a new and bloodier upheaval. Today the Balkan peoples are better organized and their underground movements enjoy the support of Russia. A deal with "anti-Communist" politicians will sooner or later bring about civil war and will alienate Russia's confidence in the intentions of the democracies. And without Russia's wholehearted co-operation peace in Europe can never be secure.

Thanks to the Nazis the peoples of the Balkans have already gone a long way on the road toward unity—not in the framework of the New Order but in their struggle against it. It has been achieved within prison walls, before German firing squads, among guerrilla groups. It can be continued only if a wise policy is adopted when peace comes. If any outbreaks of Darlanism in the Balkans are tolerated all hopes of unity will be destroyed. If those rulers who sold their souls to the Germans are allowed to change sides at the eleventh hour, the Allies will forfeit the sympathy and the support of those who fought for them and believed in them even in the blackest hours, of those who are most qualified to build up a new Europe. And blood will flow again.

The exiled Balkan governments, useful primarily as symbols of the resistance in countries they represent, will be wise to bear this in mind. This also applies to all "free" movements. Much has already been achieved for and by their peoples, not by artificial agreements, initialed in exile, but by common suffering in a common cause. National prejudices and national resentments must be laid aside.

There is more difference between a Vichy quisling and a French patriot, although they may have been born in the same village, than between a Spaniard and a Czech, both of whom fought against Fascism in Spain. The only true commonwealth is a commonwealth of ideals.

## CHAPTER XXI

### *Sonya's Life*

I SAW Sonya for the first and last time in my life in the Sofia prison one November afternoon in 1941. I had gone there with a lawyer friend of mine to see another friend—B., a twenty-year-old university student who had been arrested, together with a group of fourteen other students one month earlier, for distributing anti-German leaflets. Eight of them had been sentenced to death, the rest to lifelong imprisonment. My lawyer friend was defending B., but in spite of all his efforts he couldn't save him, and the poor boy was among those sentenced to death. He had expressed the wish to see me before his execution. As the police at that time were in ignorance as to my whereabouts and were trying to track me down, it was possible for me to penetrate into the prison only thanks to a subterfuge. The police had lost all interest in B., knowing that he was to be executed any day. There was nobody to spy on him and he was allowed to see members of his family in the prison lawyers' room. So, disguised as one of his brothers and with a forged permit, I entered the prison. Luckily nobody recognized me.

The lawyers' room overlooked the large prison courtyard. While we were talking B., who was near the window, suddenly said:

"Come and look at her."

Not understanding what he meant, I went to the win-

dow. Outside in the yard I saw a sad procession—a group of about fifty men and one woman taking their daily compulsory walk, escorted by a large number of prison guards. This was very unusual. What was the woman doing in the midst of all these men, when prison regulations forbade women prisoners to leave their particular building and their particular courtyard? In the prison women and men never met. B. explained.

"They're the parachutists. And that's Sonya. . . . We are not allowed to get in touch with them. Their cells are isolated from the rest of the prison and they are taken out only when the rest of us are indoors."

I put my arm around B.'s shoulder and gazed through the window. I was very interested to see this Sonya of whom I had heard so much. She wore a dark dress and looked tired and old. I knew she was over forty, but she seemed more. Her hair was scraped back from her ears and almost white. From time to time she drew her right hand over her forehead, as though she were remembering something. She was slightly bent and walked slowly. I could not see her face well from that distance, but I thought she looked more thoughtful than sad. Determination and defiance shone through her personality. Or was it only my imagination?

I wanted to go on looking at her but the prison guards had come to tell us that our interview must end, as we had been with B. for over half an hour. . . .

B. and his friends were hanged in the prison yard two days later. Their execution was not announced—they were not important enough. I heard about it from B.'s brother, who sent a message, simply informing me that the previous day he had seen B.'s grave. Apparently a new system had been introduced with regard to the executions.

The prisoners' families were no longer told beforehand nor were they allowed to see the dead body of their son, brother, husband or father. Men were now hanged and buried hurriedly. Only then were their relations informed, and all they were shown was a freshly dug grave in the prison cemetery.

Sonya Petrova. Born in Sofia, 1903, of a middle-class family. Arrested 1925 and sentenced to death for anti-Government activities. Sentence commuted by Royal Decree to lifelong imprisonment, because of pregnancy. Child born in prison in 1926. Father unknown. Released 1939 for good behavior. Left Bulgaria the same year. July 1941, caught by special police troops as head of a guerrilla parachutist band near the town of Lovech. Sentenced to death by special Military Court in July 1942. . . .

I imagine that the police file of Sonya Petrova must refer to her life in such prosaic terms as these. Yet the life of Sonya Petrova is one of the most interesting and fascinating I have ever known.

Sonya had neither brother nor sister. Her father, a minor railway official, spent most of his life in small Bulgarian towns, usually in the railway-station building, and Sonya's life until she reached the age of twenty was uneventful. True, the girl rather worried her mother, a simple, fat, goodhearted woman. She was worried because Sonya, when she reached the age of eighteen, showed no interest whatsoever in marriage, as all proper well-bred girls should. Sonya read books instead and that in itself worried her mother still more. "Books only give people crazy ideas," the old woman used to say to her friends. When her mother complained to her father, he only re-

plied: "Leave the child alone!" Her father, Sonya thought, was an old darling and she adored him. Perhaps it was because of his death that her life changed so completely.

Years later Sonya would tell her friends that there was one night in her life which she would never forget, the night she saw her father for the last time. It was a beautiful September evening in 1923. Somebody knocked heavily at the door and Sonya herself went to open it. Three men entered. They were in civilian clothes but they carried rifles. Sonya recognised them as the special Government Police whom the whole town feared. Sonya knew that there had been some changes in the Government months before. Her father had told her that the Prime Minister had been killed and that there was a new government. Once he told her that in several towns there had been riots with many casualties. In their own town, the newly appointed mayor had formed a special Government Police group of men. Sonya's father had been asked, as a former N.C.O. who had taken part in the war, to join the Special Police force, but he had refused. He did not like the idea, he said. He had his job in the railway station and did not want to be disturbed. This must have been some weeks before and the whole matter had been forgotten. And now, here they were again.

"Where's your father?" the men asked.

Sonya did not need to reply because her father had already come into the room.

"Get dressed. You're coming with us," one of the men said. "You are wanted for special duty."

"I have to get up very early tomorrow," Sonya's father protested.

"Do as we say," the man interrupted angrily. "You

know we are military. You have been a soldier and you should know what disobedience means!"

Sonya's father left in about ten minutes. Sonya and her mother cried the whole night; instinctively they knew that something was wrong. They were not mistaken, for the next day the father did not return. Three days later, thirty-seven men were found dead in a field near the main road, not more than ten miles from the railway station. Sonya's father was among them. They had all been shot. Some had ten, even fifteen wounds in their bodies. Sonya's father had three bullets through his head.

The Special Police did not even try to hide the fact that the thirty-seven men had been "executed" by their order. Of Sonya's father, they said that he was a dangerous element for the state security, since he had refused to do his patriotic duty by joining the Special Police when he was called upon to do so. The town was horrified, but remained calm. Not so Sonya. . . .

She left her mother (the poor woman died in misery and poverty in 1928) and came to Sofia, where she entered the university. She was regarded in different and varying ways by her fellow students. According to some she was too reserved and too wrapped up in herself; according to others, too serious. Some even thought her frivolous, while others said she was conceited. One thing, however, was certain: Sonya had more success with men than with women. Men liked her, loved, even adored her. Women pretended to like her, but really they feared her. She was at her ease with men and always preferred their company. Everyone who knew her at that time says that she was extremely attractive. She had beautiful blue eyes and there was something quite unusual about them. The spark of

enthusiasm for some, the flame of love for others and the strong feeling of hatred, perhaps, for a few. Her hair was brown. She wore it long and it fell in soft, natural waves over her shoulders. There was nothing unusual about her mouth, though some people thought it too big. Her voice, however—and on this point all her friends agreed—had an extraordinary quality. It was at times a hard, deep voice that could command, and yet it was a soft sweet voice that could whisper the gentlest words of tenderness and affection. Her figure was lovely. She was only twenty and looked even younger. Tall and slim, conscious of her beauty, she was always very simply dressed. She wore a black pinafore in the university lecture rooms and a plain dark dress in the town.

Sonya lived in an apartment consisting of one small room and of a small cellar that was kitchen and bath all in one. She did everything herself—cleaning, washing, cooking. Her home was the most popular among the students, and her parties, to which all the guests brought something and cooked it themselves, helping Sonya to wash up afterward, were awaited with the greatest eagerness. More often than not, Sonya invited men only. This, of course, did not endear her to the other girls, and she became the butt of all their gossip. She was alleged to have several lovers at a time. She was accused of being selfish and jealous of the other women and of trying to keep all the men to herself. As a matter of fact Sonya did monopolize the men; all the male university students who knew her preferred her to anybody else, and many boys would neglect their own girls in the hope of seeing Sonya or of being present at one of her parties. When she entered the university in the morning all the men had a smile for her and each would stop to speak to her. It was an honor, a

great honor, for a university student to be noticed by Sonya. The greatest honor of all was to be considered her friend.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Sonya preferred men was because she worked with them. For two years, from 1923 to 1925, she was the actual head of the Students' Labor Organization. It was a secret organization. The Government had disbanded all labor organizations, accusing them of Communist activities. But the labor groups continued to exist nevertheless. Officially there was a legal Students' Corporation, called "Botev," named after a Bulgarian revolutionary and the greatest Bulgarian poet Christo Botev, who was killed in 1862 fighting the Turks. The leaders of Botev, however, were also the leaders of the secret Students' Labor Union. Sonya was secretary of Botev, and vice-president of the Labor Union. The president of the Union, Nacho Belata, an energetic and courageous student of twenty-five, whom everybody called the "Fire" because of his passionate speeches, was Sonya's best friend. The Fire was often at Sonya's apartment until late at night, but so were many of her other friends. Sonya usually talked to her friends alone. If, as often happened, someone lost courage and his nerves showed signs of breaking, Sonya would take him home for the evening and talk to him and the man would unfailingly regain his confidence. Her many friends never discussed her among themselves, except in very general terms. They all agreed she was lovely and the best friend anyone could have. They all agreed that she was invaluable to the work. They all admired her and were ready to do anything she demanded of them. Yet each kept the secret to himself, the secret of what Sonya had said to him and to him alone. The secret of Sonya's behavior toward him when they

were alone. Was she the mistress of all or was she the sister of all? Nobody knew and nobody will ever know!

The task of the Students' Labor Union was simple: the leaders knew that throughout the whole country "something" was being planned. The students were told that a United Front had been formed, comprising all progressive political parties and movements in a joint effort to overthrow the Government. They were requested to form a big students' organization that would back the opposition coalition. They were then told to form small groups of students, *yatki* (cells), which would if necessary take an active part in the fighting against the Government forces. The leader of each of them was chosen by Sonya and his contact with the Union was maintained only through her. In 1924 and 1925 the Union received arms, revolvers, bombs and hand grenades. These groups were trained by special instructors outside the town. The communication between the students' organization and the leaders of the Labor Party was maintained through the president of the Students' Union, the Fire. He and Sonya were the only people among the students who formed the liaison with the Party.

Not all revolutionary cells in the country were, however, so successfully organized as the students' cell. This was one of the reasons why the Government police forces, after savage fighting which in some towns lasted many weeks, succeeded in suppressing the movement. But it took them two years to do so. The first revolt had broken out late in 1923, and there were sporadic uprisings until the end of 1925. In Sofia clashes with the police occurred almost every week. The revolutionary leaders were surrounded in their houses and hiding places, where they

fought to the last. Their strongholds were blown up and burned to the ground, but still they would not surrender. Month by month, slowly but surely, the police forces were extinguishing the fires of rebellion. The great network of the underground Labor movement was gradually untangled and destroyed bit by bit, cell by cell. And those of the leaders who were captured were put to death in most cases without a trial.

The police decided to arrest Sonya early in October. Six plain-clothes men came to her apartment at four o'clock in the morning and rang the bell. There was no reply. They forced the door, but the first two policemen to enter the flat were shot dead. The police withdrew, surrounded the house, compelled all the occupants of the other flats to leave the building and then organized an assault on Sonya's rooms. From Sonya's windows came several shots, killing and wounding more policemen. It was obvious that Sonya had barricaded herself in with several friends and that they had decided to fight it out. The police threw two bombs through the windows but Sonya's friends replied by throwing more bombs back at them. Fighting continued for over an hour and then the flat was silent. When the police entered it, they found two bodies only: Sonya's and the Fire's. Both were unconscious, soaked in blood, but still alive. They were taken to a hospital, where the boy died several hours later without regaining consciousness. Sonya was saved. She had eight wounds, but none proved fatal. In three weeks' time, she was discharged from the hospital and taken to prison. In January of the following year, she was tried together with a group of one hundred other students, by the Sofia Special Military Court.

The Military Court divided the students into three

groups: organizers, members and sympathizers. The organizers—thirty-one in all—were sentenced to death, the members to lifelong imprisonment, and sympathizers to different terms, ranging from three to ten years. Some were even released. There were fifteen women students in the group, but Sonya was the only woman to receive the death sentence. She received it with complete calm. Some of the boys grew pale, but Sonya had only to look at them and they regained their calm and spirit. And when her sentence was read out by the judge Sonya did an amazing thing: she began singing the old song of the revolutionary, Christo Botev. The boys joined in and within a minute all of them were singing it. The Court, the guards, the police were powerless. They did not even attempt to stop it. It was, after all, the students' last chance of singing together.

The amazing fact about this trial was the lack of evidence against Sonya. It was clear that she was the center of the whole organization yet nobody bore witness against her. Her best friends and assistants had been killed, but among those who were tried, there were many boys who knew all about the work Sonya had been doing for the last two years. Yet when questioned each one of them gave the same answer: "I know nothing about Sonya Petrova!" In vain the public prosecutor told them that they might save their lives by revealing the real head of the organization. They all preferred to die rather than to utter a word against Sonya. As there was no other evidence against her, she was convicted for opposing the police authorities with arms.

The trial was over by the end of January and the death sentences had to be carried out by the middle of February.

But Sonya's death sentence was commuted to lifelong imprisonment several days before the execution of her fellow students. And this is the most mysterious page of Sonya's life. It has remained a mystery ever since and will in all probability always remain a mystery. According to Bulgarian law a woman who is sentenced to death but is found to be pregnant cannot be executed. Her sentence is automatically commuted to imprisonment for life. Six days before the day fixed for the execution of the students, the chief of the prison sent a petition to the Ministry of Justice, asking for a Medical Commission of Inquiry to investigate the case of a woman prisoner, Sonya Petrova, who had claimed to be pregnant. A protocol to that effect was signed and Sonya's lawyer was able, in less than a day, to have her sentence commuted. He had no difficulties for the law in that respect is perfectly definite.

The doctor's examination revealed, however, that Sonya was only one month pregnant. Therein lay the mystery. Sonya had been arrested early in October of the previous year. She had stayed three weeks in hospital under police supervision and more than three and a half months in prison. Her prison cell was continually guarded, and for three and a half months she had not seen any men alone with the exception of her lawyer and the Director of the Prison. The latter she had seen not more than twice, in his own office in the Prison Building. These two interviews had lasted for only some ten minutes, and in each case it was proved that the Director's secretary had entered the room during that time and had seen nothing. The Director had been at his desk, while Sonya sat in a chair at the opposite end of the room. Sonya had seen her lawyer more often, but their interviews had always taken place in the lawyers' room, a big hall with several desks and chairs,

where at every hour of the day there were at least five clients speaking to their lawyers. No one remembered seeing Sonya alone in that room with the lawyer. Besides, both the Director of the Prison and the lawyer were respectable middle-aged married men.

The affair created a big sensation. People were divided into two groups: those who suspected the lawyer of being the culprit, and those who suspected the Director of the Prison. The lawyer's party was more numerous and had better arguments. He was obviously in love with his client, they claimed. He had defended her without taking any fees, and he had put all his other work on one side in order to be able to devote his entire time and attention to Sonya's trial. But why, the other party would demand, was the Director of the Prison so exceptionally kind to Sonya? Why did he allow special food to be brought to her by her friends? Why was she given almost every book she asked for? Why did he allow her to write more letters than the other prisoners had the right to do? Why did he receive her in his office twice in three months, when he had received no other prisoner for years? Was that not all very mysterious? It seemed plausible enough that he too had fallen in love with Sonya, it was argued, and seeing that there was only one chance of saving her life, had decided to become the father of her child? Everybody had a theory but nobody knew the truth.

Sonya herself said nothing. A special committee from the Ministry of Justice investigated the case and asked her point-blank who was responsible for her pregnancy. She simply replied: "I myself," and gave no further explanation. In September of the same year she was transferred to the prison hospital, and in October her child was born: it was a boy. Again the prison authorities tried to solve the

mystery. They asked Sonya to inscribe the name of the father on the birth certificate. She signed her own name for the mother, and left a blank where the name of the father should have been written.

"You must write some name," they told her. "The child has to have a father. Otherwise it will be registered officially as an illegitimate child."

Sonya took back the birth certificate and wrote: "Unknown."

When Sonya recovered and had to return to prison from the hospital she insisted on taking her child with her. Her friends tried in vain to convince her that, for the sake of the child's health, it would be better to send it to the government nurseries. "I refuse to have my child brought up by the Government," she insisted. "I will educate him myself. I will look after him myself. When he is old enough I'll tell him what I've done and then he may decide for himself."

The impossible happened. Sonya obtained permission to have her child with her in her prison cell. Many people thought that in reality she was killing the child, for a prison cell can hardly be considered suitable environment for a newborn baby. But soon everybody had to agree that Sonya's choice was the wisest. In a government orphanage the boy would have been treated like all the other boys, whereas in the prison he became everybody's child. Two thousand political prisoners with one child! All the women prisoners made him dresses and clothes. The men made his toys and his shoes. He lacked nothing. Everybody ordered chocolates for him. The best milk from the prison dairies was put aside for him. When the other prisoners received presents from their friends in town they invariably kept the best titbits for the child. Sonya gave

him a beautiful name—Vladimir, the name of the founder of the Soviet State—Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. That made him even more popular. Everybody called him Vladi. He became the joy of the prison. The prison doctors were asked several times a day how Vladi was, and once when the child fell ill the whole prison was in despair. No one dared make a sound lest they disturb him, and when the child recovered the prisoners organized a "banquet" in the prison dining room and presented him and his mother with gifts.

The most interesting fact, however, was that the men in the so-called Criminal Department of the prison, where all those guilty of criminal offenses were confined, were just as fond of Vladi. Assassins, thieves, crooks, bandits, forgers—people who were considered the scum of society, the criminal underworld, men bereft both of principles and scruples—became soft and kindhearted with Vladi and his mother. They sent Vladi presents every day. Sonya received more than twenty letters offering her financial support for the child.

"I am prepared to do anything for the child," wrote one man who had been sentenced to lifelong imprisonment for killing his wife.

"If anyone is rude to you or the boy, Sonya, just send me a note. We know how to deal with such people," wrote another tough who was serving a sentence of fifteen years' imprisonment for robbery with violence.

Sonya knew that these letters were sincere. She knew that these men were prepared to do anything for her and for the boy. And so one day in 1930, when Vladi was four years old and she had spent five years in prison, she appealed to these men to do something for her—to kill a man!

That day Sonya had received the following letter from the Criminal Department. (The letter was, of course, sent secretly through one of those channels that are to be found in every prison in the world.)

Dear Sonya,

A man who may interest you came in several days ago. At first he said he knew you, but when we asked him to communicate with you he refused to do so, saying that you had in all probability forgotten him. His name is Andro Pardov and he is sentenced to five years for embezzlement of public funds. We suspect that he may have served in the Police force. He claims to have been a government official in the provinces. Do you know anything about him?

Yours,  
E.

The letter was signed by one of the prisoners in the Criminal Department, who was on very good terms with the political prisoners. He had a light sentence, three years, and worked each day in a factory near the prison with other groups of prisoners. In this way, he was able to keep in touch with the "outside world," and to transmit letters, newspapers and all kinds of messages from and to the political prisoners and their friends in town. The prisoners trusted him and often gave him risky and difficult jobs to do. The man was loyal and did his best to help them. He usually succeeded, for the prison guards who accompanied him and his fellow prisoners each day to the factory were not very strict with him. He had already spent more than two years in prison and there was not much likelihood of his trying to escape, as he had only a few more months left.

Sonya read the letter and asked at once for a pencil and

a slip of paper. Then she sent back the following short note to the Criminal Department: "At all costs, find out where the man was in 1923 and what he was doing at that time." Directly the reply came, Sonya wrote back: "I want you to kill that man!"

E. received Sonya's request in the evening and read and reread it. It was as clear as it was imperative. E. made up his mind at once; Sonya wanted this thing done and therefore it must be done. There was only one problem: the whole affair had to be finished at once, the same night. Who knows, he thought, tomorrow the man may be transferred to another prison and then Sonya will never have satisfaction. Yes, the affair had to be settled on the spot. The next day Sonya must receive a letter telling her that her instructions had been carried out. E. called three of his best friends and discussed the whole matter with them frankly. They unanimously agreed to do the job the same night. It was Sonya's request!

"I'll strangle him tonight before they lock the cells," one of them suggested.

"Nonsense," replied E. "You would only be caught and there'll be an investigation. Sonya wouldn't like that."

"If we kill him with a knife, there'll be an investigation just the same!"

But C. had another plan and he whispered it to his friends.

"Marvelous!" they agreed and returned to their cells.

All cells in the prison are locked for the night. At five o'clock in the morning they are unlocked again and the prisoners prepare themselves for breakfast before going to work. Andro Pardov was sharing a cell with four

other men. A few minutes after five the following morning all four left the cell and Pardov remained alone. Immediately, two men entered the cell. They were C.'s two friends. They did not speak but Andro saw from the expression on their faces that he had cause to fear them.

"Get up!" one of them ordered, for Andro was still in bed.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Get up!"

He got up. The second man suddenly cracked Andro on the jaw with all his might, and he fell to the floor unconscious.

"Good shot!" the first man said. "Now let's finish the job quickly."

The second man took Andro from the floor and raised him onto his shoulders.

"Damned heavy," he murmured.

"Go on, try again!"

The two men approached the window of the cell. It was built high up in the wall. The first man dragged one of the beds to the window and then helped his friend to climb onto it, with Androv's body on his back. He jumped onto the bed beside him and between them they hoisted the unconscious body slowly and carefully toward the window. The window had been opened during the night and soon Andro's chin was parallel with the sill.

"If they don't see him, we're done for."

They raised Andro's head still higher. From outside it would look as though he were climbing up to look out through the iron bars.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Three shots crashed through the early morning air, and

the two men dropped Andro's body back on to the bed.

"We must make sure he's dead."

"He's dead all right! Look at the blood on his head."

In less than a minute they had left the cell.

"O.K.," they whispered to the three men who were standing guard outside the door. And all five calmly and silently went to the washroom to prepare for breakfast and for work.

Immediately after breakfast the prison bell rang. Roll call! All prisoners were lined up in the big corridor and the chief of the prison himself came and delivered a short address.

"Every one of you knows that it's absolutely forbidden to look out of the windows and to climb up to the window sills. The guards outside have orders to shoot at sight and without any warning at anyone looking through a window. Five months ago we had an accident and one of you was killed. Today another one of you, Pardov, climbed up to his window sill and he was shot. I myself went to his cell five minutes after the accident. It was quite obvious how it happened: the man had even put one of the beds near the window so as to reach it more easily. He is dead. I warn you once again that the guards outside have definite instructions. I repeat, unless any of you want to commit suicide, there is absolutely no point in trying to climb up to the windows of your cells. You will be shot. That is all. Now you may go to your work!"

When the chief of the prison had left, the prisoners assembled in groups to discuss the incident. Some went to Andro's cell, but the body had already been removed. There were only splashes of blood on the bed and on the floor. In half an hour most of the prisoners left for work

and by lunchtime the incident was almost forgotten. The dead man was a newcomer; no one knew him well, and in any case he had not been popular.

After lunch E. received a short note from the Political Department. He recognized the handwriting: it was Sonya's. Before destroying it he showed it to his friends. It ran as follows: "Well done! Thank you!"

"Amazing woman!" was E.'s only comment. "Now I understand why all those fellows from the Labor Union were so crazy about her."

"She's born to command," remarked one of E.'s friends. "I wonder who that fellow was?"

"I have no idea," E. replied. "Such is Sonya's technique. She orders and the others obey. No questions are asked. . . ."

"That means we'll never know. . . ."

"No. We shall never know."

E. was right; they never knew that Andro Pardov was one of the men who had rushed into Sonya's house that evening in 1923.

Sonya had never forgotten the night when she saw her father for the last time.

## CHAPTER XXII

### *Sonya's Death*

*July 1941.*

"Put me through to the Director at once."

"Who is that?"

"It's the Pleven\* Police Chief. And for God's sake hurry!"

"Right."

"Hallo . . . Hallo . . . Blast you, it's urgent——"

"What's that, Kovachev? Dragolov speaking here."

"Oh, is that you, sir? I beg your pardon, sir. I was cursing the operator for being so slow."

"Well, what's all this fuss about?"

"Parachutists, sir."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I've only just been informed."

"Where are they?"

"Near Pordim, sir. In the region of Kichevo."

"I suppose you've caught them?"

"Well . . . not exactly . . . I . . . that is . . ."

"Have you caught them, I said?"

"I . . . we . . . no, sir."

"Damn you!"

"Yes, sir, but you know, sir, the district is quite Red and all the peasants are helping them and hiding them."

\* A town in north Bulgaria in the surroundings of which a group of the parachutists, including Sonya, was dropped.

"If you don't catch them you lose your job!"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you asked for some soldiers from the regiment?"

"The colonel refused to let me have any. He says the soldiers wouldn't fight the parachutists. They've only just been conscripted, you see, and they're still . . ."

"There's always trouble in your bloody district."

"Yes, sir."

"What do you mean—yes, sir?"

"I mean . . . no, sir."

"You're a fool. Look here now. I'm sending you some special German shock troops by air. They'll be under the command of Captain Heffner. Get that? Heffner—H-e-f-f-n-e-r. You're to put all your policemen at his disposal. Keep everything as secret as you can. It's a very serious business. For your own information several hundred of them have been dropped in various parts of the country."

"Good God!"

"The first sensible thing you've said yet. Now hurry."

*August 1941.*

". . . The greatest obstacle is the attitude of the peasants. One of our police units wasted a whole week looking for the parachutists in certain villages round Kneja and it transpired later that they had never been in that district. The peasants had purposely given us wrong information. The severest possible measures will have to be taken in all these villages if our search is to have a successful outcome.

"The first encounter between our troops and the parachutists took place on July 21 in the forest near Krumovo. Severe fighting continued throughout the day but at nightfall the parachutists managed to withdraw into the

Troyan mountains. They left behind them seven dead whom we have not yet been able to identify but it is obvious that they were local men who had joined up with the parachutists.

"I am sending a separate report on the damage inflicted by saboteurs. Two bridges near Lovech were blown up and in a manner that shows that they have with them substantial quantities of explosives. In addition to this they are armed with submachine guns and hand grenades. . . ."

(Extract from a report from Stavri Kovachev, Police Chief at Pleven, to Christo Dragolov, Director of Police in Sofia.)

*September 1941.*

First peasant: . . . and then their bodies were taken down to the town.

Second peasant: When?

First peasant: Last night. My boy says they fought near Troyan for seven days and seven nights on end.

Second peasant: That's true. You could hear the shooting in Raikovo.

First peasant: They killed thirty policemen. And the German commander.

Second peasant: That's the style!

First peasant: They fought until they had no more ammunition left. They were all killed except two and those two blew themselves up with a bomb.

Second peasant: But I heard that two had been taken alive.

First peasant: No, only one. And she was very badly wounded. They took her to the hospital in Troyan.

Second peasant: What do you mean "she?"

First peasant: What I say. The commander was a woman and nobody realized it until after they got her into the hospital. My son says she's alive but still unconscious.

Second peasant: Does he know her?

First peasant: No, but his friends do. She's not young. She's over forty. She had great influence; all the boys obeyed her.

Second peasant: What are they going to do with her?

First peasant: Take her to Sofia if she recovers, my boy says.

Second peasant: Well, I never! I must tell my old woman about this.

First peasant: Be careful what you say, or the police'll be onto you. They're trying to hush it up, you see. Because my son says there are millions of parachutists all over the country. They're fighting the Germans and killing them. Mother Russia's backing them and my son says Mother Russia will send soldiers soon, and they'll liberate us like before. . . .

(In a village café near Troyan.)

*December 1941.*

" . . . the conditions in the Sofia Central Prison are appalling. The prison has accommodation for only one thousand and now four thousand five hundred people have been crowded into it. The position of the captured parachutists is the worst. They have been flung into damp wet cellars without as much as a mattress to lie on. Their

food is unspeakable. They have not been allowed a lawyer to defend them. But their spirit is still undaunted. Their behavior is an example to the whole prison. Not one of them has consented to give any information to the police authorities and this in spite of the fact that half of them have already died in the torture chamber. . . .”

(Extract from *Rabotnickesko Delo*, the secret Bulgarian Workers' paper.)

*May 1942.*

“It is officially announced that all the Bolshevik parachutists and saboteurs who were captured last year by special German and Bulgarian police troops in several parts of Bulgaria have now been executed after a brief trial by a special military court.”

(Radio Berlin)

## CHAPTER XXIII

### *No German Will Leave the Balkans Alive!*

HERE I must introduce one of the real heroes of this story. Grigor Grigorov is a monkey-faced little man of about thirty, flashily dressed and never without a cigarette. He is certainly one of the best friends I ever had. In the pre-German Sofia days Grigor was my secretary, though perhaps the term "secretary" is a euphemism. Certainly he was not a secretary in the sense that he kept my files in order and ever remembered an appointment. But apart from that there was nothing he could not do. His most intimate friends ranged from murderers to policemen. He hobnobbed with politicians, cabaret owners, priests and charwomen. There was no government office where he could not get what he wanted done in the shortest possible time. For he invariably knew the right people—not the long-winded minister or his helpless private secretaries, but the anonymous clerk who is the backbone of such institutions.

Grigor's loyalty to me was all the more remarkable because he did not share my political faith, or rather, he was converted to it only in the autumn of 1940. Until then, although as an extreme individualist he hated the Nazis (as he said, he detested every variety of oppressor, including tax collectors!) he had no particular sympathy for the Western democracies, especially after the war in Finland during which he had like most Bulgarians taken

Russia's side. But in September 1940 his attitude changed and he became a passionate admirer of Britain.

I have often been surprised that the average Englishman is not more conscious of the "finest hour" in Britain's long history—that summer of 1940. Some Englishmen even say that Hitler made a mistake in not attacking Britain directly after the collapse of France. It is true that Hitler made a mistake, but the mistake was that he *did* attack Britain. He attacked and was defeated. His daylight air offensive—the first stage of the invasion—was frustrated by the tiny fighter force of the R.A.F. It was a major military defeat which prevented him from moving on to the second stage—invasion proper. It was easier to realize this in a country where one was confronted with the Germans' absolute certainty of triumph. I remember an official information letter, printed in the German Legation in Sofia and distributed throughout Bulgaria in August 1940, which was rash enough to declare "by the time you read this letter the glorious German armies will have completed their conquest of the British Isles."

But to return to Grigor.

When I was arrested he thought the least he could do was to get arrested too and to share my fate in the camp. But for weeks arrest eluded him although he left no stone unturned in pursuit of this goal. He abused ministers, quarreled with police officials and insulted the Palace secretaries. In vain. Finally he went to see the almighty Drexler of the Gestapo and insisted that he should release me immediately. Otherwise he, Grigor, would have his revenge! He was, of course, arrested as a result of this unusual interview. But to his intense annoyance he was sent, not to my camp, but to a labor camp in northern Bulgaria. He stayed there three months and when at last,

in the summer of 1941, he was allowed to go back to Sofia, he at once began to devise plans of escape.

He worked hard and courageously. His first idea was to acquire a boat and in it to cross from the Bulgarian Black Sea coast to Turkey. At the risk of his life he five times smuggled his way to the different Black Sea ports in search of people who might help us. He succeeded in buying a boat which he promptly christened the *California*, in deference to one of the great ambitions of his life, which was to visit California. He joined forces with two Greeks who also had the police on their trail and were anxious to escape to the Middle East, and together they bought an engine . . . from, of all people, a German! The Greeks were excellent sailors and they installed the engine in the boat. The prospects seemed definitely rosy and on a cold autumn day I arrived in the little coastal town from which we were to sail.

But at the last moment our plans were reported to the local police unit. The man who had sold us the boat suddenly decided that he had not asked a high enough price. Grigor gave him some more money but *l'appétit vient en mangeant* and he still was not satisfied. Whereupon Grigor and one of the Greeks knocked him down. They felt sure he would say nothing to the authorities as the boat was still registered in his name and he was bound to get into trouble if he did. But he sent an anonymous letter to the police telling them to come and arrest us all at the house where we were staying. Luckily Grigor, with his usual uncanny knack of forming convenient friendships, had made friends with one of the local police officials who warned us in time for us to disappear. Later the letter was traced and the owner of the boat arrested. He confessed, with the result that his boat was confiscated and he was

sent to prison. It served him right but it did not help us.

We left the coast and, thanks chiefly to the Workers, made our way, traveling from village to village, to Sliven in eastern Bulgaria. Sliven is a small industrial town and is completely "Red." The population consists of workers in the cloth and wool factories and of their families and so there at least we were safe. We stayed with a friend of Grigor's, an out-and-out Red.

Sliven had a special prison for political offenders, who at that time numbered about 1500, mainly soldiers. It had also a small but efficient and well-organized guerrilla army. It was of course an army of workers and its numbers varied. When Grigor and I visited headquarters, I do not think there were more than one hundred men. But I was told that at times their numbers swelled to four and five hundred, forming the nucleus of the district "people's army." The strange part was that most of the workers lived in Sliven itself and were employed in the different factories, yet this force continued its normal life in the mountains to the north of the town. We walked for a whole day before we reached it and we stayed a week and had a delightful time. Grigor revealed unsuspected talents as a cook and was in consequence a welcome guest.

At that time this small band of guerrillas was not doing anything spectacular. I have heard since that in the spring of 1942 they were engaged in actual fighting but when we were with them they were still, as one of their leaders, a Sofia University student, told me, in their "training period." The hopes of these Workers were pinned on the future advance of the Red Army.

"The moment the Soviet forces reach the Balkan frontiers," the student explained, "we shall stab the Germans in the back. But we must have arms enough to do the job.

"Then"—his eyes gleamed—"then . . . no German will leave the Balkans alive! We have no arms yet," he continued, "but we're sure to receive them later on. At this moment the Red Army is hard pressed and everything is needed for the front."

We stayed a month all told with the Sliven workers and then moved on to Plovdiv where we had old friends, and from there we made our way toward the Turkish frontier. The plan had been carefully worked out by Grigor. He had obtained the name and address of a peasant who lived close to the frontier. The problem was how to reach the frontier village which was situated in the so-called military zone, but Grigor had solved that too. He had obtained faked permits according to which we were road workers.

"Actually," Grigor said, "the only false thing about these permits is the names on them. After all, of late, you and I *have* been road workers, haven't we?"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### *No Man's Land*

WITH the winter months we drew nearer to the mountains along the frontier and this had its advantages. The villages we visited were so remote and so disconnected from the outside world that there was little danger of our running into any police agents. On the other hand, the mountains, being very near to the Turkish frontier, constituted a so-called military zone which was under the direct control of the German military authorities. But with our faked papers and our navvies' getup we were fairly safe. The chances of our coming across anyone who would recognize us were slight. Grigor and I strolled about the villages, most of which were crowded with German troops, searching desperately for people who could be of use to us. Eventually we discovered the old peasant who was willing to take us into Turkey by a secret mountain path. His village was only separated by a few miles from Turkish territory and he knew every inch of the surroundings.

Unfortunately the old guide was ill with fever and not in a fit state to undertake such a hazardous journey. He told us to wait, and we waited there for a week only to hear to our great disappointment that the journey would have to be postponed indefinitely. The old boy said he couldn't risk it; he had received information that the frontier guard had been reinforced all along the line and

that it was too dangerous. We continued our journey toward the frontier on our own. We reached the last village, which was divided in two by a river. The river was already in Turkish territory. But it was impossible even to attempt crossing the frontier there. Our way was barred by several rows of deep trenches, observation posts, gun sites, etc. I looked at Grigor in dismay, but he refused to lose hope.

That evening while we were sitting in the village inn suddenly a Bulgarian officer came over to our table and shook our hands warmly.

"This is a nice surprise! What in heaven's name has brought you to this Godforsaken hole?"

I was too stupefied to answer anything. This was an old friend of mine whom I had not seen since 1937 when he was a student in Paris. If he found us with faked papers and decided to disclose our true identity we would be shot then and there. Should I attempt to pretend that he had made a mistake? It would not take him in—besides Grigor had begun to speak.

"Hold your tongue, you bloody fool," he muttered, "and we'll tell you all about it. But first let's order some drinks. What'll you have?"

We knew that R., this young lieutenant, like most of his generation serving in the army, was pro-Russian and republican in his sympathies. Yet that was no guarantee that his attitude toward our adventures would be a sympathetic one, especially as, if he befriended us, it would be at the risk of his own life. But there was no going back now.

Grigor explained to R. what our position was. He looked grave and before replying beckoned to the proprietor of the inn to bring us another round of drinks.

"It's my duty to report you," he said slowly. "Perhaps I will—later. But first I want to hear your story. Your true story. Will you come back with me now to my billet?"

We nodded and rose from the table.

R. lived in a tiny dilapidated peasant's house quite near the inn. He had one little room and in it he had installed his camp bed and two portable chairs. We sat down on the bed and he produced some cheese and a bottle of good red wine from his suitcase, which served both as table and as cupboard.

"*À la guerre comme à la guerre,*" he apologized. "We live like animals here. Month after month the same thing. The monotony of it is killing me. I'd rather be fighting any day."

Grigor drank several glasses of wine and began his story. R. listened attentively and made no comment. He smoked one cigarette after another.

"That's all," Grigor concluded. "I have nothing more to tell you. You can do what you like with us. Directly you recognized us I realized it was no use trying to hide anything from you."

"You're playing a very dangerous game," R. remarked.

"It's the only game we *can* play," Grigor retorted.

R. smiled and lighted another cigarette.

"Had you come here a year ago—and I was already here then, damn it—I would have handed you over to the authorities without hesitation. After all, friendship and duty are two separate things. Or so I thought then. Now I'm not so sure. I've seen too much here at this frontier. I see things differently now."

The atmosphere was very tense. The tiny room was

hazy with smoke. Grigor and I waited in silence for R.'s verdict.

"I'll help you to get out of this village. I'll put you tonight in one of our carts. They'll be going into the town at daybreak to fetch our supplies."

"But that's straight into the lion's jaw. The whole place is thick with policemen."

"I'll give you a safe address to go to. From there you can go to Plovdiv. And from there you must try and get back to Sofia."

"What do you mean?"

"The only way to cross this frontier is to cross it legally."

We gazed at R. without understanding.

"That is to say, with some sort of passport and some sort of visas. I'll put you in touch with someone who can help you. You can't cross the frontier in any other way. It would be suicide to try. It's not a frontier, it's a front. If you get anywhere near it in civilian clothes you'll be shot at once."

"Not after dark."

"At night the surveillance is even stricter."

"Other people have done it."

R. shook his head. "Not in the last few months. Before that it may have been possible. But now there isn't a hope. Believe me—I've been here long enough to know."

We were reluctantly compelled to agree. We had no other choice but to trust R. And I could not believe that he intended to betray us.

R. continued: "You'll probably think I'm impossibly romantic and I shan't like that. I want to help you just as I've wanted to help other people. And all because of a girl. A woman rather. I admire her. I'm not in love with

her, which makes it all the more romantic. I suppose you could describe her as a prostitute."

"A prostitute?" I echoed.

"Yes. Banal, isn't it? Just another cheap love story, it sounds. But it's not a love story. It's a story of hatred. And it's one of hundreds of stories just like it. I've heard so many of them here at the frontier. From all sorts of people and from all over Europe. At present Europe is nothing but a continent of hatred. And I've learned to hate it and to hate this system of hatred. It must sound very melodramatic to you."

He paused and then asked abruptly: "Do you remember Marcel Farhi in Paris?"

"The ski champion who married that lovely girl!"

"You mean Janine?"

"Of course."

"She's here now."

"Here in this village?"

"She's the girl I was talking about."

Rue Royer Collard was a little street typical of the Quartier Latin, so small and so crooked that a car had barely room to pass between its narrow pavements. When I arrived in Paris for the first time I asked the policeman who stood in front of the Jardin du Luxembourg to direct me to it. He searched for it in his little notebook, but in vain, and finally exclaimed in disgust that such a street could not and did not exist.

As a matter of fact it was only a couple of hundred yards farther on, to the left of the Boulevard St Michel, but it was too unimportant and too humble a street to figure on the policeman's plan. The second house as you entered it from the Boulevard was the Hôtel Royer Col-

lard which boasted twenty bedrooms, a single bathroom and one servant pretty enough to justify me in all my pre-conceived ideas about Paris midinettes. It was not really a hotel but a students' boardinghouse, very old, very cheap and not very clean, but famous in the Quartier for its proprietress. Madame was extremely fat and extremely ugly but always delightfully willing to postpone the payment of rent when her lodgers were in financial difficulties, which of course they invariably were. The manager of the establishment was less accommodating and used to claim scandalous sums for damage done to the sitting room when the students returned there in the early hours of the morning after a party. His name was Serge and he claimed to be of aristocratic Russian origin, although he did not speak a single word of Russian. He was altogether a suspicious character. Nor was his official status that of hotel manager; he was Madame's lover and it is to be presumed that their liaison had a solid financial foundation and probably no longer any other, for in addition to being fat and ugly Madame was over fifty.

I disliked Serge the moment I set eyes on him. He eyed me with suspicion when I asked for a room and demanded a week's payment in advance. Naturally I refused and he did not insist. He'd done his best: if I coughed up so much the better; if I didn't, *tant pis*. . . . We had another more serious row three weeks later and I threw a heavy law textbook at him. It hit him on the head and his bald pate began to bleed. I would have been kicked out of the hotel if it had not been for Marcel's intervention.

Marcel had been there for over two years and was one of Madame's favorites. He was a funny fellow. He had been at the American College of Sofia with me and his nickname there was Michigan (he had been flunked in an

exam for being unable to remember the name of Lake Michigan!). He was a very good violinist and a very poor mathematician. His chief claim to fame, however, as far as we were concerned, was the beautiful girl friend whom, to our intense envy, he used to visit on week ends. She was ten years older than he, a slender divorcée, and she haunted our schoolboy imaginations. We all secretly respected Marcel for this liaison which seemed to us the climax of all our romantic dreams.

After Marcel had taken his degree he went to Paris to study chemistry. Two years later, when I met him at the Hôtel Royer Collard, I found he had abandoned the scientific career to which he was so ill-suited in favor of tap dancing! He had also fallen in love. Janine was a charming nineteen-year-old blonde and a great flirt. All the students who knew her predicted that this affair would die a rapid natural death, in the same way that its predecessors had. But to their surprise it blossomed into an official engagement. This great event had just occurred—and in the student world it overshadowed the Front Populaire disturbances—when I arrived in Paris at the end of 1937.

It was at the party Marcel gave to celebrate his engagement that Serge became a casualty. Fifty students were present and almost as many nationalities. French, American, Russian—both White and Red—Scandinavian, Rumanian, Greek, Bulgarian. It was an international gathering of people who loved not only French wine (as they proved that night only too conclusively!) but also the French way of student life, which in those days was the most delightful life under God's sun. It must have been five in the morning when Serge came to demand silence. He was promptly ejected but I felt it was beneath

my dignity to allow him to withdraw unharmed and I hurled the first heavy book I could see at him. It belonged to Janine—"Why was it in Marcel's room?" someone asked. "Surely she doesn't study law there?" She made me promise to buy her a new one, as Serge, not unnaturally, had confiscated the weapon of his undoing.

I got to know Janine better. During the next few weeks we used to forgather almost every day—she, Marcel and I and several other students. They were married in the first days of January and continued to live in the Royer Collard. Both were very much to the Left and Janine took part in many Front Populaire demonstrations and worked in a voluntary organization in aid of Republican Spain. She was vital, energetic and amusing. She called us all "*mes enfants*" and was, I think, as genuinely fond of us as we were of her.

Marcel's father was a minor official in a Sofia bank and a Jew. Janine's father had also been of Jewish origin but she could not remember him. He had died while she was still a baby and she had been brought up by his sister who was married to a French *fonctionnaire*—a Christian. Janine never mentioned her mother and we heard from one student that she had run away from her husband and gone to South America. But we were interested only in Marcel and Janine, not in their antecedents. They were happy, they were our friends and we had a good time together. . . . We did not look farther ahead.

After I returned to Sofia, Marcel wrote to me regularly. He had got a nice job in a musical publishing firm and Janine was working in the Paris Students' Library. They had taken a small flat which of course was always crowded with their friends from the Quartier. In the summer of 1939 I received a telegram instructing me to drink to

their health; Janine had given birth to a little daughter. In the letter that followed she described her child as being as frivolous as she herself had been. It had come into the world sooner than was expected and had found its layette incomplete and its parents unprepared!

My heart was heavy with anxiety in May 1940 when Hitler's hordes began their march on Paris. Somehow the tragedy of the beautiful city and the personal tragedy of Janine and Marcel were united in my mind, and each was part of the other. All communications ceased between occupied France and the Balkans and although I made several attempts I was unable to discover what had happened to my friends. I little thought that I would hear their story a year and a half later in a remote village at the Turko-Bulgarian frontier.

In the first days of the German occupation Marcel and Janine were left in peace. Marcel had already lost his job before the armistice, as the firm for which he worked, which published only light dance music, had closed down. Janine, however, was still employed at the library and somehow they contrived to make both ends meet. But in the autumn of 1940 suddenly disaster came upon them. Their baby girl died. She caught cold and it developed rapidly into pneumonia. They could afford neither a good doctor nor the necessary medicines which already were becoming scarce, and it was all over in a few days. Then on one dull November morning Marcel received an intimation from the police that he was to leave the country within the next two weeks. As a Bulgarian subject he applied to the Bulgarian Legation for his visa. The Legation had moved to Vichy and it was some time before he could get in touch with it. He and Janine sold most of

their meager belongings and scraped together enough money to buy two third-class tickets to Sofia.

But there still remained the problem of transit visas. The German one was out of the question; neither money nor influence could procure a German transit visa for a Jew, and in any case Marcel possessed neither. The Italian consulate proved equally unhelpful. And meanwhile the French police who had prolonged Marcel's *permis de séjour* several times were losing patience. In January 1941 he was arrested. Janine continued her work for another month, then she too was arrested and sent under police escort together with her husband into the unoccupied zone. From Marseilles they were taken, still under escort, to the Italian frontier. The strain of the last months and the final shock had been too much for them and they no longer greatly cared what became of them. They expected to be interned in an Italian prison or concentration camp but much to their surprise they were given a free passage through Italy to the Yugoslav frontier. It was there that they heard that the Germans had entered Bulgaria and when they reached the Bulgarian frontier post at Dragoman they were arrested although they both had Bulgarian passports and entry visas. "Things have changed a great deal since you were last here," the passport official said apologetically and, as though to prove his point, he glanced toward some German soldiers who were pacing up and down the platform.

Marcel and Janine spent the next few weeks in the Dragoman police prison. It was bad enough for Marcel—they were in separate buildings—but at least he could speak to the prison authorities in his own language. Janine went through agony. No one there knew France or French and her only means of communica-

tion with the prison guards was the few words of broken Russian she still remembered. Years ago she had begun to learn Russian, in a burst of enthusiasm for the Soviets, little dreaming to what use she would one day have to put it. . . . The food was altogether inadequate and the accommodations appalling but they both survived until the day of their release, which came as unexpectedly as had their arrest.

The Germans attacked Yugoslavia on April 6 and through their prison walls Janine and Marcel listened to the roar of artillery and heard the Nazi tanks rumbling along on the other side of the frontier. One week later they were released. The police chief was promoted and appointed to a town in Macedonia and in his delight at his new post he set the young couple free. They arrived in Sofia only to find that in accordance with the new anti-Jewish laws Marcel's father had been dismissed from his bank. His mother had had a stroke and was half-paralyzed but they were both overjoyed to see Marcel and his wife, whom they had long since given up for dead. For two months they all lived together in two miserable rooms in the outskirts of the town. Marcel's younger brother, aged sixteen, was expelled from his school and joined them there.

One morning in the early days of June the front door bell rang. Janine went to open it. Two policemen were there with a warrant to search the house. They arrested the entire family: Old Farhi, his bedridden wife, Marcel, Janine and the boy. They were given an hour in which to pack all their belongings and then they were taken under police escort to Svilengrad—the frontier station between Bulgaria and Turkey. There old Farhi was informed by the police that he had been deprived of his nationality

on account of "antistate" activities and that he and his whole family would be deported to Turkey, by order of the Director of Police, Christo Dragolov.

Farhi protested, knowing he had the law on his side. According to the law no Bulgarian subject, whether he be Christian or Jew, can be deprived of his nationality. He insisted that if there were charges against him he should be imprisoned and tried in the proper way. When he saw that these arguments were of no avail he begged that mercy might be shown to his wife who could not walk and might die at any moment. Without passports or visas there was no hope of their being allowed into Turkey. The local police chief merely shrugged his shoulders.

They set off in the evening on their tragic journey. Marcel carried his mother in his arms. A police lorry took them as far as the last frontier post. There they were met by the frontier guards who told them:

"Can you see it over there in the distance? That's the Turkish post. You'd better walk straight toward it. And don't you ever come back here. We'll have to shoot you if you do."

At the Turkish post they were told what they knew already only too well, that they would not be allowed to enter Turkish territory. They spent the night at the frontier post. Next morning they trudged back to the Bulgarian side. The soldiers gave them some food and advised them to walk southward in the direction of the Maritsa river and to steer clear of the frontier posts. They had no alternative but to follow this advice and they started walking again.

Near the Maritsa, in no man's land, they found others whom the same fate had befallen. Jews from all over Europe. Many of them had threaded their weary perilous

way through half a dozen countries in pursuit of the distant dream of Palestine. Some had been arrested in Hungary, deported and kicked from frontier to frontier until they reached the Maritsa. Many of them had lived for months in the no man's land between frontiers. Before the German attack on Yugoslavia hundreds of Jews were massed in the no man's land between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria and Yugoslavia and Hungary. Others were grouped on the Polish-Rumanian frontier. After Antonescu's decree whereby any Jew who crossed the frontier into Rumania was automatically sentenced to death many of them chose this short cut into oblivion. The lucky ones found employment in the labor groups organized in Bulgaria for the benefit of the Todt organization, and worked on the roads. Their number was negligible. Only those who were young and strong enough could attempt it and sooner or later most of them were thrown back into no man's land.

Although my experiences in the past four months had made me, as I thought, apathetic and indifferent to all accounts of the sufferings human beings endure at the hands of their fellow creatures, I could not restrain a shudder of horror as I listened to the story of no man's land. R. was as upset as I was.

"Now you understand why I hate this system," he said. "I've seen too much of it, or rather enough of it to hate it."

"What happened to the Farhis?"

"The old woman died. They dug her grave there in no man's land and an old Jew said some prayers over it. The boy went to work on the roads. Marcel escaped elsewhere with some young Jews. I don't know where to, or whether

he got there. Probably not. The old fellow was sent with a group of old men to the Greek frontier, somewhere near Salonika. The last I heard of him was that he had been sent on from there to a camp in Albania. I expect he's dead by now."

"But how could Marcel go and leave his wife behind?"

"He didn't leave her. She left him."

"How do you mean?"

"You see, we here at the frontier, we aren't normal people. It's the same on both sides. We stay here for months on end and never get any proper leave. It's cold, bleak, endlessly monotonous. We never see a woman either. So you can imagine our feelings when we saw Janine for the first time."

He paused. "Go on," I whispered.

"The fact is that she went away with some soldiers. I don't know if they were Bulgarians or Turks. It doesn't matter. They both do it. And in a spirit of friendly understanding, what's more. Does it sound awful to you? Well, it is awful. When the soldiers on one side have had enough of the girl they send her across the lines to the other side. We send women to the Turks and they send us women. That's all there is to it. Life at its most sordid."

"Is that the way Janine was exchanged?"

"Yes. I found her in a tent with some of my men."

"How frightful!"

"Actually most of the girls volunteer to do this. Otherwise they starve."

"But don't you feed the people in no man's land?"

"No. At least not officially. But both the Turks and I give them what's left over from the soldiers' rations. And that doesn't amount to much. So the girls generally prefer to get out of no man's land."

"I suppose they get fed that way."

"And paid—in some cases."

"Did . . . does Janine?"

"Not when I saw her. But then I took her away with me." R. looked me straight in the eyes. "I expect you think I'm a swine. This is what happened."

When R. saw Janine in the tent in the midst of his soldiers, he recognized her at once. She recognized him too but she did not speak. There was nothing R. could say to the soldiers so he made some stupid joke and beckoned to the sergeant to join him outside the tent. He asked the man to tell him what he knew about Janine. But none of them knew anything. She had come to them that day from a neighboring post. She was beautiful and even gay and they liked her. She spoke funny Bulgarian, it sounded more like bad Russian. In the morning they would pass her on to the next tent.

"I want to see her before she goes," R. said and with a smile of complicity the sergeant saluted.

Next morning she was brought to his tent. In a colorless voice, drained of all bitterness, she told him her story. She did not cry and made no plea for help. She seemed resigned to her fate. "I was too much of a coward to decide to die," she explained. "I wanted to go on living—even this way."

R. looked after her himself for several weeks and told her she need not go back to the soldiers. She listened indifferently. She was completely apathetic. Then R. had to go to the neighboring town on duty. He took Janine with him and gave her in keeping to a friend of his who was stationed in a near-by village.

"Is this the village?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Do you think I could see her?"

"If you wish to."

"Perhaps better not—for her sake. Where does she live?"

"In another inn just near here. The officers have their mess there. She works as a waitress."

"But not only as a waitress?"

"No."

"What a life!"

"It's not a life. But in a way she's quite comfortable. Better off than some. The officers all like her."

"Do you see her much?"

"I do, quite often. As a matter of fact I saw her last night."

"I think perhaps I'd rather not see her. But give her my love."

The next morning Grigor and I were put into a peasant cart. R. had arranged for one of his soldiers to drive us into the town. We left at dawn and after a quarter of an hour we reached the summit of a small hill overlooking the village.

"Can you see the frontier post?" our driver asked. "Between that wood over there to the left and the brook in no man's land."

With mixed feelings I gazed on no man's land. There was nothing unusual about it. In the stillness of the morning the little stream gurgled merrily. It looked as normal as any man's land.

## CHAPTER XXV

### *Escape*

THE many books of fiction and fact that deal with underground activities in Nazi-occupied Europe certainly exaggerate one point—the possibilities of procuring faked passports good enough to stand up against the scrutiny of the Gestapo. I know from bitter experience that few things are more difficult. I take off my hat to anyone who gets hold of a faked passport in German Europe today. I'm not taking off my hat to myself. I didn't procure a passport for myself. Grigor did.

It took him three months to do so, despite his unwearying energy and initiative. Naturally I cannot disclose details of his efforts and the adventures to which they led, and indeed most of them are still unknown to me. All I knew at the time was that through the address our no-man's-land friend had given us, Grigor got in touch with some people who were in on this passport racket, and that he supplemented these with diverse shady connections of his own. This needed money and I was kept busy negotiating loans and wondering whether I should live to repay them! Eventually we got our two passports, Croatian passports issued in the name of the assassin Ante Pavelich's puppet government. For the first time, I "recognized" the Croatian state and registered gratitude for the fact that this product of Nazi New Order fantasy was serving at least *one* useful purpose! Nevertheless, I was skeptical

as to the value of these passports, though we were assured that once the requisite visas were stamped on them they would be as good as genuine.

The visa problem was quite as tricky as the passport problem had been and of course we were hampered by not being in a position to circulate freely in the city. We had safely made our way from the frontier back to Sofia, thanks to the help of loyal friends—mainly Workers—and we were living in a safe place. But Grigor could meet his accomplices only at night and in the obscurest of haunts. He was back again on the police black lists and police agents had gone twice in one week to his flat to arrest him. Of course they had not found him at home, but the necessity for watertight caution further delayed our activities.

Finally one Saturday evening Grigor informed me triumphantly that the visas were ready. And so they were, boldly stamped on the phony passports and looking for all the world like what they were not—a beautiful sight. But would the Gestapo agree? We could only hope for the best.

We caught the train to Plovdiv that night. Grigor had arranged everything. The documents were in a small attaché case which he, with all the appearances of airy unconcern, put in the rack above our heads. The idea was that if by any chance we were recognized by a police agent we might claim that the attaché case was not ours and that we had never seen it before. It also contained some business letters which Grigor had collected in Sofia and one or two German books (neither of us knew German).

Until Plovdiv the journey was uneventful. But the next three hours after that were the most agonizing I have ever spent. It was only thanks to Grigor's wonderful sang-

froid and to his capacity for making audacious and lightning decisions that we got through. He really deserves the flyleaf commonplace: "Without whom this book would never have been written."

In the afternoon our train drew into the frontier station. An hour before that we had entered the military zone where no one may travel without special military permits. These Grigor had but they did not satisfy the officer who came to inspect the train. He objected that one of the requisite signatures was missing. My heart sank but Grigor's usual glibness did not desert him. "Our permits were signed by the colonel in person," he explained, "and that's why we didn't bother to go through the whole procedure." The officer asked him which colonel. Grigor readily supplied his name and Christian names and added that the colonel was his uncle, that he was a jolly nice fellow and—here a note of warning crept into his voice—about to be promoted to the rank of general. The officer retired, somewhat awed. (Needless to say the colonel existed only in Grigor's imagination.)

Our next visitor was a plain-clothes policeman who wanted to know exactly where we were going. We were the only two civilians on the train which was crowded with German and Bulgarian troops on their way to the frontier. Grigor replied that we were traveling on business. We were meat merchants and acting as contractors to the German supply services. Why didn't we have special permits from the Political Police? Because the chief of the Political Police in the town was Grigor's best friend. They had been classmates, Grigor was engaged to his sister, and so of course we were going to stay in his house. Grigor sounded so convincing that I almost believed him myself.

Then came the agony—when we got out of the train.

There were no longer any direct railway communications between Bulgaria and Turkey. The bridges over the Maritsa river had been blown up during the Balkan blitz and were not yet repaired, although German engineers were working on them overtime. Thus travelers from Bulgaria to Turkey and from Turkey to Bulgaria were obliged to proceed to the frontier by car. On both sides of the frontier this was a military zone and neither the Turkish nor the Bulgarian (German) authorities would allow any cars but their own to penetrate into it. A perfect example of international co-operation! Incidentally, it was very advantageous to the Gestapo officials on the Bulgarian side, who were able to examine your papers at leisure while you paced up and down outside in the cold waiting to exchange cars. The car started only after they had okayed the credentials of every passenger.

Directly we got out of the train Grigor disappeared into the W.C. to destroy our permits, which were of no use to us any longer. From now on we had to rely on our passports. It was lucky for us that the police officials who had already questioned us were on duty only in the train, for had they seen us make our way into the little waiting room reserved for travelers who were leaving the country, Grigor's scaffolding of ingenious inventions would have speedily crumbled. Half a dozen of the usual Prussian-looking "tourists" were assembled there already, together with three Italians and a couple of other passengers, miscellaneous, voluntarily nondescript. We handed our passports to the Bulgarian authorities. They were returned to us within half an hour. I heaved a sigh of relief and Grigor frowned at me. "One more obstacle," he whispered by way of encouragement, "the worst!"

He was right. The German frontier authorities—in

other words the Gestapo—were next on the list. Both Grigor's name and mine were in their files, embellished by photographs and by extracts from relevant police records. I indulged in frantic mental arithmetic from which I deduced that the chances they would *not* recognize us were very small indeed. Grigor muttered the Bulgarian equivalent of *Qui ne risque rien n'a rien*, which seemed to me very cold comfort.

Preceded by one Italian, one German and by another man of indefinite nationality who remained silent throughout, we got into a car. Next to the driver sat a Bulgarian soldier clutching his rifle. We were told that the car would proceed to the Turkish frontier directly the German authorities gave us back our passports. It usually took about half an hour, the Italian said.

The half hour passed. One hour. One hour and a half. I did my best to conceal my nervousness. Even Grigor chain-smoked. Two hours passed. Still no passports. Casually the driver remarked:

"There must be something wrong somewhere. They've never kept us so long before."

I felt sure I was going to faint. My stomach was playing cat's cradle. The Italian complained of the cold in bad French with a prima-donna roll of the r's. The silent man produced a French novel from his coat pocket and started reading it upside down. Grigor chewed the stump of his cigarette. I said I felt tired and sleepy. I pulled my hat down over my eyes, leaned back and pretended to go to sleep. Grigor followed my example and, what is more, he really did go to sleep.

The minutes that passed seemed leaden with the whole weight of eternity. I wrenches my thoughts away from the bloody passports and concentrated my energies on the

old device of thinking of something interesting enough to take my mind off my worries. I returned to my favorite problem—the unity of those Balkans which, please God, I was about to leave behind in their turmoil of blood and devastation. It was there, in that car, with the soldier's bayonet before my eyes, with a German on one side of me and an Italian on the other—all three symbols of Balkan disunity and oppression—that I first thought of writing this book. That is, if I survived that "one more obstacle—the worst."

I realized then, as I realize now, the difficulties of such an undertaking and the controversies it would arouse. I visualized the attacks I would be subject to if I made the attempt of presenting to the British and American public a true picture of the Balkans, as they are now and as, in all probability, they will be in the future, a picture stripped of the camouflage of prejudice and torn from the refuge of wishful thinking.

I am not referring to the criticisms of Balkan quislings. Doubtless this book will win me promotion in the Gestapo files. The Gestapo's accusations are of no importance since, according to them, any opposition to their regime of oppression and corruption is sponsored and subsidized by London, Moscow and Washington all at once! Nor do I take into consideration the objections of some Balkan political circles in exile either in Britain or in America. Undoubtedly they will accuse me of having been either a paid agent of the Third International or a defender in democratic disguise of the enemy Balkan nations. For there are Balkan circles both in the United States and in Britain which still think in terms of boundaries and territories and strategical frontiers, who still cherish visions of one Balkan

country wresting chunks of territory from its neighbor and of one Balkan nation ruining itself in indemnities and reparations for another. They still cling to the past, refuse to acknowledge the present and dare not look into the future.

For my part I am not interested in the hypothetical quarrels as to what chunk of Balkan territory belongs to which Balkan nation. I have already stressed that these territories belong to the Balkan peoples as a whole. The problems of these peoples are *social*, not national. It is their governments who, chary of tackling wholesale social problems, prefer to warm their popularity by the artificial, easily kindled flame of nationalism.

I was as sure when I first thought of writing this book as I am sure now that I have almost finished it, that my synopsis of Balkan problems would not find favor in nationalistic Serbian circles nor in nationalistic Greek circles, not to mention the nationalists in Sofia and in Bucharest. They will not hesitate to describe me as their enemy and I have no ambition to be anything else. This book is their enemy. I hate extreme Serbian nationalism and extreme Greek nationalism as much as I hate Bulgarian nationalism and Rumanian nationalism. I regard these movements, whether they emanate from Sofia, Athens, Bucharest or Belgrade as anti-Balkan in general and as anti-Bulgarian, anti-Greek, anti-Rumanian and anti-Yugoslav in particular. The majority of the Balkan peoples—Albanians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians—have had to pay for the mad obsessions of their nationalists who, under cover of patriotism, have done untold harm and caused infinite suffering to their peoples. Will, for example, the Rumanians recover in thirty, or even in fifty years from the insane nationalism

of General Antonescu who has slaughtered an entire generation to the hollow cry of a "Crusade against Bolshevism"?

All the Balkan nationalists have labored against the idea of Balkan unity and against the interests of the peoples they professed to represent. I think and hope, however, that they belong to the past. It is highly improbable that—unless they are once again installed in office by foreign powers—they will play a role of any significance in the future of the Balkans.

There is a third category of potential critics of this book who are more to be feared—not on account of their criticisms, which I am afraid I could only dismiss as complimentary, but on account of their general policy. I refer to "anti-Red" elements, whatever that may mean.

Not only Balkan, but British and American anti-Red will certainly regard my book as "Bolshy" literature. "You want us to surrender the Balkans to Russia," they will argue, and many of them will sincerely be convinced that I have been deputed by the Communists to make Red propaganda in the English-speaking world. They will be wrong, though, in many cases, through no fault of their own. They will be wrong because they do not understand what, in the Balkans, can be defined by the word "Communist"—a word which, in any case, has been so distorted by prejudice as to be almost meaningless.

Ever since the last war all Balkan governments have exploited the label "Communist" for their personal convenience. They do so more than ever now. The German agent, Neditch, who has instituted a quisling government in Belgrade, dismisses as Communists all Serbs who are opposed to his collaborationist regime. Ante Pavelich,

head of the puppet Croat State, does likewise with the Croats. Atonescu in Rumania issues death sentences against those who dare criticize his policy—Communists again. Under the same pretext Boris in Bulgaria kills thousands of Bulgarians, Macedonians and Greeks, both within the prewar Bulgarian frontiers and in the newly acquired territories which he has "liberated." The traitor Greek Prime Minister Tsorachoglu condemns as Communists the guerrilla groups that fight the enemy who has conquered their land. According to the Fascists in Tirana, Communist activity is rife even in the Albanian mountains.

All this is not new. Those who now fight Nazism, and its synonym oppression, in the Balkans did not start their fight when the Germans occupied their territory. They are the same who waged war against Boris, against Carol, against Paul and against the many Greek dictators, including Metaxas, long before war was declared. And this fight was a more important one than the inter-Balkan bickering upon which Western European diplomats concentrated their headaches. What is more, it was a fight that was unknown to Western Europeans, from whom information was withheld and who were instead vouchsafed lurid glimpses of the Bolshevik bogey. Any struggle of the Balkan peoples against their governments was reported as a Communist rising and in consequence public opinion in the West showed no dismay at the quelling of "Communist rebellions."

The situation in the Balkans is more easily understood if one bears in mind that none of these countries have had any free elections in the last ten years. The "Communist" elements were proclaimed illegal, their leaders imprisoned or killed and their organizations paralyzed. No trade-

union movement and no association of workers which was independent of the government was allowed to exist. All were "Communist" and disposed of accordingly.

I have never belonged to any Communist organization but I do not doubt that if I were a Balkan worker—Bulgarian, Serb, Rumanian or Greek—I would be a Communist. In other words, I would want to see my fellow workers organized in professional associations and I would insist on the defense of workers' rights. Which does not mean that I would be any more of a Communist than Ernest Bevin in England or William Green in the United States.

These Communist phenomena in the Balkans were the outcome of what I would call the separation of the state from the people. The state administrations of the various Balkan countries had come to regard themselves as almighty bodies that were alone responsible for policy and responsible only to themselves. The people's organizations, their parties and their trade-unions were proclaimed, one after the other, "antistate" elements. When war broke out all the political parties were banned in Bulgaria, Rumania and Greece. In Yugoslavia they existed only partially. Boris in Bulgaria, Carol in Rumania, Paul and Stoyadinovic in Yugoslavia and Metaxas in Greece were Fascists and dictators par excellence. When, in Greece, the people rallied to the call of the Government to fight the Fascist invaders, it was more in spite of it than because of it. They fought in the aggressor the will to oppress them with which their own rulers had made them familiar and which they had already sampled, on a smaller scale, at home.

It is therefore not surprising that those who led the struggle against oppression before the Nazis came should

now be the main factors in present-day resistance against the Axis. My attempt to present a true picture of these forces and of their political background is not an attempt to advocate that the "Balkans should be given to Russia." This is an absurd suggestion in itself, if only on the ground that it is not for us to judge whether Russia even wants them and whether the great task of inner reconstruction that awaits her will or will not be a sufficient outlet for her energies. That is not the point. The point is that, if one is to avert Balkan civil war which would be a prelude to European civil war, one must look at the Balkan problems in their true light and understand the so-called Communist movements for what they really are.

"Arrest him!"

My political dreams crashed to the ground. A German official and a Bulgarian officer, with two soldiers in tow, were standing at the door of the car. They were looking straight at me. The end had come. I nudged Grigor and he rubbed his eyes. The Bulgarian officer was peering at the photograph on one of the passports—I was sure it was mine. Then he asked:

"Which of you is Victor Raczinski?"

"I am," the silent man replied in Russian.

"Arrest him," the officer repeated.

The two soldiers pulled the man out of the car and he shuffled off toward the police building with one of them on either side. The German and the Bulgarian followed him into the building.

"Why have they arrested him?" Grigor asked finally.

"Something fishy in his papers," the driver grunted and to stress his disgust, spat violently. He was losing money. He had been kept waiting for three hours on account of

that damned spy. He hoped they'd shoot him. Thank God, he could get going at last. . . .

It was too good to be true. It was unreal. Grigor and I trudged through the snow of no man's land toward Turkish territory. I walked faster and faster and paid no attention to his grumbling. "You are a fool. Can't you control yourself?" When I reached the Turkish frontier post I realized I had been running.

"You don't seem quite yourself," the Italian remarked. "Have you got a temperature?"

Grigor wheeled round and growled back at him: "It's none of your business, you Fascist swine!"

I was still dazed and I looked at Grigor in amazement. When I saw his beaming face I realized that it was true and that we were really free. This was Turkish territory.

The Italian slunk away and Grigor laughed. "I've dreamed of saying that for months! Come on, let's go and have a drink."

There was a little canteen to the left of the frontier post. We ordered raki, lots of it. We had already drunk several glasses when a fair slimly-built boy came up to our table. "Do you speak Russian?"

"Yes. . . ."

"My name is Erik Szimanski."

He was a Pole. A young Polish officer who, with a friend, had escaped from an internment camp in Hungary. For months they had hidden in mountains and in villages, in Yugoslavia and in Bulgaria. Eventually they had managed to get hold of phony documents of some kind and had decided to try to cross the frontier into Turkey. It succeeded. Or rather he had succeeded. His friend had been caught.

"He was the man in your car," he explained.

His eyes narrowed and he gazed out of the window back at the other side.

"Perhaps I should go back," he murmured.

There was nothing I could say so I said, "Don't be silly," and Grigor ordered some more drinks.

"Let's drink."

"Let's drink," the Pole echoed. His voice was taut and I realized he was on the verge of breaking down. I filled his glass again and spilled some raki on the paper table-cloth. The Italian was eying us from a respectable distance. A dog barked. We went on drinking. Grigor suggested a toast, the Russian word for freedom:

"*Svabodu!*"

It was a toast that we could drink again.

THE END







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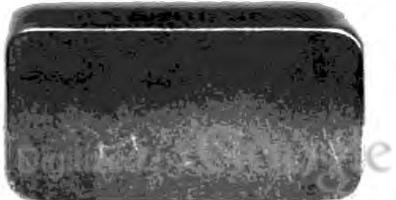




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